

————— **Research Report** —————

**Staying Out:  
Women's Perceptions of  
Challenges and Protective Factors  
in Community Reintegration**

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**2008 N° R-201**

**Staying Out:  
Women's Perceptions of Challenges and Protective Factors  
in Community Reintegration**

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May, 2008

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

A number of individuals were involved in the completion of this study. Appreciation is extended to Rosemary O'Brien, Lynne Chatelain, Kelley Blanchette, and Crystal Pinay for their role in the development of the survey and interview. Thanks also to Lynne Chatelain, Meredith Barrett, Dena Derkzen, and April Dorion for their assistance in the distribution of survey materials. Meredith Barrett and Dena Derkzen facilitated a number of interviews, while Aileen Harris played a key role in the data entry process. Gratitude is also extended to Paul Sonnichsen for his review of the report and to Kelley Blanchette for her methodological and editorial expertise.

Community parole officers across Canada assisted by distributing survey materials to the women; thank you for taking the time to support our research in this way. Finally, we are grateful to the women who took the time to share their feedback with us, thereby making this study possible. We very much appreciate your contribution.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, research has shifted from focusing only on factors associated with the initiation of criminal careers and recidivism to also examining those related to desistance from crime. Though most of the research conducted to date has been focused on male offenders, there is evidence that these factors differ for men and women. As a result, the study summarized in this report focused on women offenders' perceptions of the factors associated with desistance – termed *protective factors* – and of the challenges they experienced during the community reintegration process.

Participants were Canadian federally-sentenced women offenders who, after serving a period of incarceration, had successfully stayed in the community for at least one year. The study employed surveys and semi-structured interviews (conducted via telephone) to gather information and opinions from women on release in the community on the challenges they encountered upon release as well as the factors they perceived to be most helpful to the desistance process. A total of 22 surveys and 12 interviews were completed; however, it is important to acknowledge that only about one-fifth of the women identified as being eligible for participation in this study actually completed a survey and / or interview. As a result, though this report is innovative and has several practical implications, the information within it must not be considered representative of all federally-sentenced women who have successfully reintegrated into the community.

In terms of challenges to reintegration, women reported that the period immediately after release was most difficult. Principle reasons for this were adjusting to life in the community after a period of incarceration and residing in a halfway house; comments regarding halfway houses revolved around the presence of drugs in the houses, their geographic distance from women's families and home communities, and the rules at the houses. Most women reported that as time elapsed after their release, the reintegration process became easier. This was partially because as time passed, women found ways to meet their basic needs, such as finding employment. Some women also explained that reaching full parole and therefore being able to leave the halfway house and, in some cases, return to their partner or family, made the process easier.

Other challenges were related to specific events, including traumatic experiences like the death of a loved one, and events relating to the women's criminal activity or period of incarceration, such as debt or family-related issues (e.g., weakened familial bonds). Most participants also recounted facing considerable stigma upon release, such that it was often difficult to find work and housing.

When asked about the factors which they perceived to have facilitated the reintegration process, most reported making a conscious decision to live a crime-free and / or drug-free life. Women also focused a great deal on the support they derived from their relationships, including those with their partners, families, children, and mentors (i.e., other women who had been successful in reintegration). Among participants, families figured most prominently as a source of support. Children, on the other hand, provided motivation for following a pro-social lifestyle. Few women had relationships with mentors, but those who did valued them; many others mentioned that they would have appreciated such bonds. Relationships with parole officers were also very important to the women in this study. In most cases, these relationships were positive and were marked by respect, flexibility, and encouragement.

Besides relationships, women also mentioned employment, involvement in religion or church, skills acquired through program participation, community support (including the help of advocacy groups), and Elders as important components in their reintegration. Employment was particularly critical, and was cited by almost every woman as a key element in her reintegration. Women appreciated employment for a number of reasons, including the associated ability to support themselves financially, the benefits in terms of keeping themselves busy, and the pro-social connotations of employment.

The findings from this study clearly demonstrate that the constellation of challenges faced by each woman is varied and extensive. It is therefore important to begin to work towards the identification and management of these obstacles as early as possible during a women's sentence. This variability also underscores the importance of flexibility in the reintegration process, including in parole supervision, the application of parole conditions, and residential accommodations. Altogether, this study adds to the limited literature in the area of desistance and complements the established body of literature on

recidivism to contribute to our understanding of why, after contact with the criminal justice system, some women persist in crime while others do not. This study was particularly timely, in that the Correctional Service of Canada has recently identified community transition as a major area of focus. It has committed to undertaking specific measures relevant to women in this area, including updating the *Community Strategy* for women offenders and enhancing community transition services in the areas of supervision, accommodation, and intervention. The information collected within the context of this study will inform these initiatives.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, there has been an accumulation of empirical and theoretical literature focused on the factors associated with the initiation of criminal careers and with recidivism (e.g., Andrews & Bonta, 2006; Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996). Although the majority of this work has been either specific to male offenders or assumed to be ‘gender-neutral’, there has also been growth in this area specific to women offenders (e.g., Chesney-Lind, 1989; Stuart & Brice-Baker, 2004). While this literature has greatly increased our understanding of criminality, it has become clear that it is not sufficient, in and of itself, to explain the entirety of most individuals’ criminal careers. As a result, there has recently been a shift towards the study of factors associated with desistance from crime (e.g., Laub & Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2001). One component of this research has been an examination of what are termed *protective factors* – that is, those factors which facilitate movement towards a crime-free lifestyle. Notably, there is evidence that these factors differ for men and women offenders (Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998; Benda, 2005).

There is a sense among some researchers that a shift in focus towards desistance and protective factors is overdue; as one author put it, an overemphasis on factors linked to risk of criminal behaviour has led to “an indifference to resiliencies and strengths” (O’Brien, 2001, p. 66). However, most studies in this area have examined specific factors defined a priori by researchers (e.g., Katz, 2000; Leverentz; 2006b). The present report is different, in that it summarizes the results of a qualitative examination of the factors facilitating community reintegration *as perceived by women*. Specifically, perceptions were gathered from women who, after a period of incarceration, have been successful in staying out of a correctional facility for at least one year. The report also examines the specific challenges they have faced. Use of a qualitative methodology combined with a focus on women’s perceptions allows for the collection of detailed idiographic information, particularly unexpected information, which in turn permits a better understanding of women’s desistance from crime. Ultimately, knowledge of challenges and protective factors facilitates the development of the best strategies and programs supportive of successful community reintegration for released women offenders.

## **Challenges upon Release**

A number of researchers have identified obstacles which women must negotiate upon release from a correctional facility. In general, these obstacles inhibit movement towards a crime-free lifestyle. Not all women encounter each of these challenges; however, they are common, and it is likely that most released women will face difficulties in a number of the following areas:

1. Meeting basic needs, such as housing and food (Austin, Bloom, & Donahue, 1992; Evans, 2006; Richie, 2001);
2. Dealing with the stigma associated with being labeled an 'ex-offender', particularly as it impacts housing and employment prospects (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Evans, 2006; Leverentz, 2006a; O'Brien, 2001);
3. Regaining custody of children, where applicable, and developing or adapting relationships with them (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Dressel, Porterfield, & Barnhill, 1998; Evans, 2006; Women's Prison Association, 2003);
4. Gaining employment which provides a living wage for the woman, and, possibly, her child(ren) and significant other (American Correctional Association, 1990; Pollock-Byrne, 1990; Women's Prison Association, 2003);
5. Establishing new pro-social relationships (Covington, 2003);
6. Avoiding substance use (Evans, 2006; Women's Prison Association, 2003);
7. Managing mental health concerns (Richie, 2001; Women's Prison Association, 2003); and,
8. Fulfilling the conditions of parole and of the correctional plan, which can be numerous and difficult to balance with other pursuits such as education or employment (O'Brien, 2001).

This review provides a sense of the magnitude and breadth of challenges facing women upon release, but is by no means comprehensive. Women may also have to face adjustment to new technologies if they've been incarcerated for a long period of time (Evans, 2006); decisions regarding intimate relationships, which may be abusive, controlling, or not supportive of a pro-social lifestyle (O'Brien, 2001); day-to-day difficulties such as acquiring medications with limited income (Brown, 2004); and so on. Clearly, the obstacles facing women upon release are numerous, of significant

consequence, and can represent serious challenges to women's successful reintegration to the community. Protective factors, however, can help women to negotiate these challenges.

### **Protective Factors**

It is not surprising, given the accepted importance of relationships in women's lives (Miller, 1976), that the most studied protective factors for women are family and other relationships. A number of studies have determined that family stability and cohesiveness, as evidenced by close ties between a woman and her family and children and positive family communication, can protect women from returning to custody (Bloom, Owen, Deschenes, & Rosenbaum, 2002; Lambert & Madden, 1976). Positive family support has also been found to be associated with better institutional adjustment in federally sentenced Canadian women (Blanchette & Taylor, 2005). For young women in contact with the juvenile justice system, family support and guidance are important protective factors (Carr & Vandiver, 2001), while for adult women, children can be particularly influential. One study of 300 women found that the number of children a woman had in her custody was predictive of tenure in the community after release (Benda, 2005). Another researcher found an interaction between ethnicity, parenthood, and desistance; Katz (2000) determined that gaining custody of a child encouraged discontinuation of criminal behaviour for White women, while having no influence on the criminal behaviour of those of other ethnicities. Interestingly, one study revealed that there may be a disconnect between the actual and perceived impact of having children on criminal behaviour (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002). In this study, which included both quantitative and qualitative components, no quantitative evidence was found supporting an impact of parenthood on desistance for either male or female participants. Based on their review of qualitative data, however, the authors nonetheless noted that "women were more likely than men to ... focus heavily on their children as catalysts for changes they had made" (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 1052).

Another aspect of family influencing desistance is women's relationships with their spouses or intimate partners. While some researchers have demonstrated that women's high quality relationships with pro-social partners are associated with desistance (Koons,

Burrow, Morash, & Bynum, 1997), others have found no such association (Giordano et al., 2002), or that some women feel that a period of relationship abstinence is necessary upon release (Leverentz, 2006b). One researcher, in examining the role of romantic relationships in women's desistance, has argued that relationships can both facilitate and hinder desistance, and that the same relationship can fulfill both roles at different time points (Leverentz, 2006b). This researcher also found, in her qualitative examination of 49 women and their partners, that relationships do not need to involve a pro-social partner to facilitate desistance; occasionally, women and their partners move towards a more pro-social lifestyle together. Leverentz further argues that there may be benefits from relationships with those with a criminal past, as these partners may be better able to provide support and empathy.

Relationships with peers are also important. Positive, pro-social peer influences and networks have been found to be associated with desistance (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Holland, 2002, cited in Runggay, 2004; Sommers, Baskin, & Fagan, 1994). Peer relationships may also facilitate desistance indirectly, as researchers have found that disclosing a decision to stop engaging in criminal behaviour to peers (Sommers et al., 1994), and being concerned about negative perceptions by peers (in a sample of men only; Peersen, Sigurdsson, Gudjonsson, & Gretarsson, 2004) play important roles in the desistance process. It has also been argued that receiving validation from peers of pro-social behaviour and a new pro-social identity can reinforce discontinuation of criminal behaviour (Runggay, 2004).

A number of other factors have also been examined. Perhaps chief among these is stable involvement in legal employment, which has been found to be associated with a movement away from crime (Koons et al., 1997; Lambert & Madden, 1976; Schram, Koons-Witt, Williams, & McShane, 2006; Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998). Findings are not universally supportive of such an association, however, and at least one team of researchers has found no link between job stability and desistance (Giordano et al., 2002). Another factor to receive considerable attention is desistance from substance abuse. A number of studies have found that discontinuation of heavy substance use is associated with discontinuation of criminal behaviour, both for men and for women (Kerner, Weitekamp, Stelly, & Thomas, 1997; Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998). Finally, research

with samples of male offenders has begun to shift towards intra-individual characteristics which can exert a protective influence, such as motivation to stop criminal behaviour (Farrall & Bowling, 1999), insight regarding the consequences of criminality (Haggård, Gupert, & Grann, 2001), and a sense of self-efficacy regarding desistance (Burnett & Maruna, 2004). As of yet, areas such as these do not seem to have received any significant research attention for women offenders.

### **Women's Perceived Protective Factors**

Most of the research on protective factors has been conducted 'from the outside looking in'. In other words, researchers have set out to examine those factors which they believe are most relevant to desistance. Two studies (Galbraith, 1998; O'Brien, 2001) were found, however, which represent broad analyses of interviews and other information provided directly by women offenders who were successful in remaining in the community. Such studies, based on their qualitative nature, have the advantage of being able to tap into unanticipated factors.<sup>1</sup> Both studies were American, and therefore some caution must be exercised in generalizing the findings to a Canadian context; nonetheless, there are likely to be significant overlaps between the two jurisdictions.

In the first study, Galbraith (1998) interviewed 20 women who have remained crime-free since release from custody. She also interviewed a number of individuals involved in the supervision of women offenders, including wardens, psychologists, and community stakeholders. Notably, the feedback gathered from both sources was very similar. In reviewing data stemming from these interviews, Galbraith noted the following factors which seemed most relevant and influential for women in remaining crime-free: relationships with people who cared, listened, and could be trusted; relationships with other women who were role models; well-trained staff (especially female staff); proper medication, when appropriate; inmate-centred programs, including parenting, employment training, education, substance abuse and mental health treatment; efforts to reduce trauma and revictimization; financial resources; and safe environments. Of these,

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<sup>1</sup> A number of the studies reviewed earlier also used a qualitative methodology, either in whole or in part (Bloom et al., 2002; Giordano et al., 2002; Leverentz, 2006a; Sommers et al., 1994). The two studies reviewed here, however, are different in that they are very broad. The earlier studies were circumscribed in their qualitative data collection, focusing only on specific areas (e.g., relationships; Leverentz, 2006a).

relationships were perhaps the most important. Indeed, Galbraith noted that “all the women described experiences or relationships with individuals that helped them begin to change and recover. For many of the women, a loving and knowledgeable person – often an inmate or female staff – was critical” (1998, p. 69).

More recently, O’Brien (2001) interviewed 18 women who had been in the community without revocation for at least six months. Women in this sample also indicated that relationships were of utmost importance, with their relationship with their parole officer key among these. Many of the women O’Brien studied reported feeling that their parole officers could be both an important source of support and assistance and a source of difficulty and challenges. The women reported feeling positively about their parole officers when these officers treated them respectfully, did not intrude in their daily lives more than necessary, exhibited flexibility, and provided information. Parole officers were viewed less positively when they were overly strict, enforced rules and special conditions arbitrarily, and invaded the women’s privacy.

Other former inmates were also found to be important resources upon release, and a number of the women indicated that despite the common restriction against association with persons with criminal histories, relationships with people meeting this description were too valuable to give up. Indeed, O’Brien wrote that “many of the women believed that it was *only* those people who had experienced the pains of incarceration who could be really helpful to others coming out” (2001, p. 106, italics in original). The women in this sample appreciated other former inmates’ familiarity with the reintegration process and the potential obstacles to be faced after release.

Findings from these two studies both resemble (e.g., emphasis on relationships) and differ from (e.g., influence of other ex-offenders) those studies whose topics were pre-determined by the researchers. As such, they demonstrate that there is continued value in conducting research in such a manner as to allow both expected and unexpected information to emerge.

### **Current Study**

The present study primarily employed a qualitative methodology. Using surveys with both closed and open-ended questions as well as semi-structured interviews which were

guided by the women themselves, the present study aimed to gather rich data regarding the challenges women encountered upon release as well as the factors they perceived to be most helpful in the desistance process. The study focused on women on conditional release who, after a period of incarceration in a federal correctional facility, remained in the community without revocation for a period of at least one year.



## **METHOD**

### **Recruitment Strategy**

Women eligible for participation in this study were those serving a federal sentence who had been released to the community for a period of at least one year and no more than five years and who had not had their release revoked (either due to technical reasons, such as breaches of conditions, or due to a new offence). Due to recruitment logistics, women who had been deported or who had reached warrant expiry were excluded from the study. Using the Correctional Service of Canada's automated offender data management system, 152 women meeting these criteria were identified as of July 15, 2007.

Through the intermediary of the women's community parole officers, they were each sent an information package detailing the study and asking for their participation. The package included a cover letter which detailed the women's rights in participating and provided researcher contact information for any women seeking further information (Appendix A). The letter asked for women's feedback on the factors which they perceive as helpful in remaining in the community after release from a federal correctional facility. Those who were interested in participating had the option to complete and return the enclosed survey and / or to return a contact card providing their information in order to participate in a future telephone interview. As returned surveys were anonymous, it is not possible to determine whether any women completed both the survey and the interview. A total of 22 surveys and 12 telephone interviews were completed.

### **Data Sources**

Women could choose to complete the survey (Appendix B) and / or the semi-structured interview (Appendix C), both of which focused on the challenges women encountered as well as the factors they perceived to be most helpful in the desistance process. Surveys and interviews each allow for the gathering of rich and comprehensive information. Moreover, these techniques permit unanticipated themes and information to emerge. For both the surveys and the interviews, women were instructed to feel free to skip any questions they wished, and they were provided with space and time to provide feedback in areas other than those covered by the data collection instruments.

Both the survey and the interview were produced in a consultative fashion. In March 2006, a one-day community research workshop was held to help formulate the survey and interview questions. Participants included six women who had successfully reintegrated into the community, as well as parole officers and representatives from community agencies such as Elizabeth Fry Societies, John Howard Society (Berkana House), and Salvation Army (Greenfield House). Focused discussions allowed for the identification of a number of topics considered relevant for inclusion. Themes emerging in the literature on protective factors were also incorporated. The draft survey was then shared with representatives of the Women Offender Sector and the Aboriginal Initiatives Directorate of the Correctional Service of Canada for their review prior to finalization.

### **Analyses**

The first component of this report provides a profile of the women eligible for participation in the study. A more circumscribed profile of the women who actually participated follows; this more limited profile focuses only on a few key areas which were included in the data collection instruments. Content analysis was then used to interpret the qualitative data arising from the surveys and interviews.<sup>2</sup> In addition to discussing the themes recognized, this document also includes a number of representative quotes from the women in order to illustrate the feedback received.

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<sup>2</sup> In keeping with the qualitative nature of these analyses, as well as the challenges of aggregating across the two data collection instruments without knowing which women (if any) completed both, proportions and counts were generally not included in these content analyses.

## RESULTS

### Recruitment Sample Characteristics

The average age of the 152 women solicited for participation in this study was 40.1 years ( $SD = 12.5$ ;  $Median = 38.3$ ). As shown in Table 1, more than half of these women were Caucasian, and approximately equal proportions were Black and Aboriginal. At admission, the majority of the women were single, separated, divorced, or widowed.

Table 1. Recruitment Sample's Demographic Profile

Demographic Variable	Number (%) of Offenders	
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	79	(52.0)
Aboriginal	29	(19.1)
Black	27	(17.8)
Other visible minority / unknown	17	(11.2)
Marital Status		
Single / widowed / divorced / separated	102	(67.1)
Married / common-law	49	(32.2)
Unknown	1	(0.7)

Note.  $N = 152$ .

Nineteen women in this sample (12.5%) were serving indeterminate sentences. For the remainder, the mean aggregate sentence length was of 4.6 yrs ( $SD = 2.4$ ). As can be seen in Table 2, about half of the women had been convicted of at least one violent offence on the current sentence, with assault, weapons offences, and robbery being the most common. Four-in-five of the women in this sample were convicted of at least one non-violent offence, with property offences, drug offences, and "other" offences (e.g., failure to appear in court) being notably common.

Table 2. Recruitment Sample's Offence Profile

Present Conviction(s)	Number (%) of Offenders	
<b>Violent Offences</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>(49.3)</b>
Homicide (murder, manslaughter)	8	(5.3)
Attempt murder / Conspire to commit murder	3	(2.0)
Assault (major / minor)	25	(16.5)
Robbery (with / without weapon)	16	(10.5)
Kidnapping / Forcible confinement	5	(3.3)
Sexual assault	10	(6.6)
Arson	12	(7.9)
Utter threats	13	(8.6)
Weapon offences	18	(11.8)
<b>Non-Violent Offences</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>(82.9)</b>
Drug offences (importing, trafficking, production)	44	(29.0)
Property (break and enter, theft)	48	(31.6)
Fraud	12	(7.9)
Other non-violent	105	(69.1)

Note.  $N = 152$ . Proportions will sum to more than 100 because many women were convicted of more than one offence.

By far the largest proportion of women were originally released to the community on day parole ( $N = 142, 93.4\%$ ), while smaller numbers were released on full parole ( $N = 9, 5.9\%$ ) or at statutory release ( $N = 1, 0.7\%$ ). At the time of the study, women had been in the community an average of 2.07 years ( $SD = 1.0$ ), with a range of 1.0 to 4.9 years. By this time, most women had been granted full parole ( $N = 136, 89.5\%$ ). A small number remained on day parole ( $N = 10, 6.6\%$ ), and several had reached their statutory release dates ( $N = 6, 4.0\%$ ).

### Participant Sample Characteristics

For the women who actually participated in the study, only a more limited profile is available. As can be seen in Table 3, participants were typically Caucasian, and aged between 25 and 34 years. Most respondents reported having been convicted of drug-

related or violent offences. Finally, most women had been under community supervision for between one and three years.

*Table 3. Participant Sample's Demographic and Offence Profile*

Variable	Number (%) of Offenders		
	Survey ( <i>n</i> = 22)	Interview ( <i>n</i> = 12)	Total ( <i>N</i> = 34) <sup>a</sup>
<b>Age</b>			
25-34	10 (45.5)	5 (41.7)	15 (44.2)
35-44	7 (31.8)	3 (25.0)	10 (29.4)
45-54	2 (9.1)	2 (16.7)	4 (11.8)
55 or more	2 (9.1)	1 (8.3)	3 (8.8)
Not provided	1 (4.5)	1 (8.3)	2 (5.9)
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
Caucasian	12 (54.5)	10 (83.3)	22 (64.7)
Aboriginal	3 (13.6)	1 (8.3)	4 (11.8)
Black	2 (9.1)	0 --	2 (5.9)
Other	3 (13.6)	0 --	3 (8.8)
Not provided	2 (9.1)	1 (8.3)	5 (14.7)
<b>Present Conviction<sup>b</sup></b>			
Property offence	4 (18.2)	2 (16.7)	6 (17.6)
Drug offence	13 (59.1)	3 (25.0)	16 (47.1)
Violent offence	7 (31.8)	6 (50.0)	13 (38.2)
Other	5 (22.7)	3 (25.0)	8 (23.5)
<b>Length of Community Supervision, To Date</b>			
1 – 2 years	13 (59.1)	3 (25.0)	16 (47.1)
2 – 3 years	5 (22.7)	5 (41.7)	10 (29.4)
3 – 4 years	3 (13.6)	1 (8.3)	4 (11.8)
4 – 5 years	1 (4.5)	2 (16.7)	3 (8.8)
Not provided	0 --	1 (8.3)	1 (2.9)

<sup>a</sup> Results in this column must be interpreted cautiously as women who completed both data collection instruments (if any) are represented twice in these summations.

<sup>b</sup> Proportions of women in each offence category will sum to more than 100 as many women were convicted of multiple offences.

## **Challenges to Reintegration**

### *Challenging Times and Events*

More than half of the women indicated that the time period immediately after release presented the most challenges in terms of their community reintegration. The two main reasons for this were difficulties associated with residing in a halfway house and adjustment to a new environment. A number of respondents commented on the presence of drugs in their halfway house; they indicated that this presence tested their commitment to staying clean. One woman suggested that it was necessary to “figure out how to keep the drugs out of the house, because that should be a safe house where you can be in.” Women also reported finding it difficult when their community did not have a halfway house, and they were therefore distant from their family and children. In at least one case, the distance and transportation difficulties were such that even when granted day passes, the woman was unable to travel to her home community and return in time to meet curfew; for this reason, this woman was only infrequently able to see her children during her period of day parole. Finally, some respondents commented that there were too many rules and too much supervision at the halfway houses. For instance, one woman shared that the staff at the house where she resided phoned her employer “every single day, sometimes more than once” to verify her presence, and that this ultimately caused problems between her employer and herself.

A number of women also commented that the time period immediately after release was difficult because of the adjustments associated with going “from locked up to walking the streets.” As one woman said, “it was culture shock.” Another respondent shared that she felt like she didn’t fit in to the community after a lengthy period of incarceration. She asked, “What do I possibly have to say that doesn’t reflect a long prison life?” This adjustment was intensified for women who had moved to a new community upon their release. One woman explained that this period was the most difficult for her “because I started off in a new city and was alone.” On the other hand, women who returned to their home community spoke of other challenges, such as choosing not to interact with former friends. One woman who returned to her home community also noted, in speaking about her family, that “their expectations of my readiness for the community were unreal.” In

this way, it would seem that there are difficulties associated with reintegration both to the community of origin and to a new community.

Women also discussed the events which had been particularly challenging in their reintegration. Broadly, these can be grouped into two categories: (a) events arising out of criminal activity or incarceration and (b) significant life transitions and traumatic events. In the former category, respondents talked about having to face civil lawsuits related to their criminal offences, substantial debt, and dealing with child custody issues. One woman shared that she lost sole custody of her child during her incarceration, and “having to deal with my son’s father in and out of court” upon her release was very complicated. By far, the most commonly mentioned challenge arising from criminal involvement was the stigma and label of being an offender. Women shared that this label impacted their ability to find meaningful work, appropriate housing, and build social connections. One respondent shared how her criminal record closed many doors for her: “If you want to be honest when you apply for a job or an apartment and you tell people that you have a criminal record, then they don’t choose you.” A second respondent said, “I couldn’t even get a job scrubbing toilets with my criminal record.” A number of women also mentioned that the stigma of being under federal supervision influenced their subsequent interactions with police officers when they reported crimes of which they were the victims. One woman stated that she reported an assault to the police, but “as soon as the police found out I was a parolee, all interest in it ended.” These statements underscore how profoundly the stigma associated with a criminal record can impact women.

Respondents also found certain life transitions and traumatic events quite challenging. A number of women moved during their supervision periods; many found this stressful. One respondent had been involved with social services regarding her child’s custody during her incarceration, and shortly after her release, she discovered that her child had been adopted. Another woman’s “eldest child moved out and it was difficult to adjust. She was one of my main supports.” A number of women also experienced the death of a family member or other loved one. Though this was acknowledged as being a traumatic event, some of the women indicated that they were better prepared to deal with such an event after having been incarcerated. One woman stated that “if my father had passed

away while I was in jail or before I had gone to jail, I would have been no good.”

Another explained that she was determined not to return to jail, despite whatever challenges life might throw at her: “I had traumatic things happen when I was out, but at this point in my life there is nothing, nothing that would send me back.”

### *Managing Challenges*

Despite the challenging events some encountered, most women reported that as time elapsed after their return to the community, the reintegration process became easier. One woman explained this in relation to early challenges: “It’s gotten far easier since the halfway house.” Others indicated that the process became easier as their needs came to be met – that is, as they found jobs, housing, and support systems. Still other respondents spoke of becoming accustomed to their new lifestyles or of being reinforced for their positive choices. One woman explained that “I don’t really miss it [my old lifestyle] all that much anymore because I’ve seen that living this way [pro-socially] is a lot easier for me.” This respondent went on to explain that her current lifestyle was just as rewarding as that which she had previously, though the rewards stemmed from a different source – satisfaction with her choices and pride in herself.

Notably, a considerable portion of respondents indicated that the special conditions included in their conditional release were helpful during the early transition periods. One respondent was particularly enthusiastic, stating that she was “100% for parole, to have restrictions and regulations.” Women felt positively about their special conditions for two reasons: (a) they felt that the conditions provided a continuation, in diminished form, of the structure to which they had become accustomed while incarcerated, thereby facilitating a gradual reduction of structure, and (b), the conditions acted as a reminder of the consequences of their behaviour. A small group of women were ambivalent towards their special conditions, indicating they had chosen to behave in a pro-social manner and would not engage in behaviour counter to their conditions, regardless of whether the conditions were assigned. Finally, a number of women felt that their special conditions were a hindrance. Notably, none of the women who gave this response provided an explanation focused on themselves – instead, they spoke of the impact of their conditions on their partner or family. For instance, one woman reported not being able to give her



nieces and nephews rides to the family cottage, which meant that it was necessary for both her and her siblings to make the long trips separately each time. Another described how her partner was frequently contacted by her parole officer; both the woman and her partner found this frustrating. The respondent shared her partner's feelings, saying, "I told him that it was because of the type of offence and he says, 'Well, I really don't care, I'm aware of it. Why can't they leave me alone? I'm not under their jurisdiction.'"

### *Preparation for Reintegration*

Women were asked a number of questions regarding the extent to which they felt prepared for reintegration. Though more than half of the respondents indicated that, prior to their release, they felt ready to reintegrate into the community, it is notable that a relatively large proportion indicated that they did *not* feel prepared. Comments in this area pertained to preparation at the level of emotions, knowledge, and practical considerations. In terms of emotions, some respondents indicated that they were scared, anxious, or felt overwhelmed. In terms of knowledge, women indicated that they were "unsure what to expect" and that there were inappropriate assumptions on the part of staff regarding their level of knowledge of day-to-day activities. One woman who had been incarcerated for a relatively long sentence, and who had been housed at a facility which had discontinued its reintegration program, said, "I didn't even know how to go about getting a bank account." Comments regarding practical considerations focused on clothing and transportation. For example, one woman indicated that she gained weight while incarcerated and no longer fit the clothes she wore upon admission, and "clothing funds were cut, so I pretty much walked out with my institutional sweats on."

As mentioned, more than half of the women *did* feel prepared for their reintegration at release. One group of respondents indicated that questions regarding preparation for reintegration were nearly irrelevant, as they were had only committed one offence and had extensive pro-social histories. Others listed programs, spirituality, knowledge, and support (from a variety of sources, including family, friends, and staff) as reasons for their feelings of preparedness. One woman shared that "access to women who got out but came back in to talk to us about their experiences really helped me process what I needed to prepare myself for when I eventually got released." Another respondent

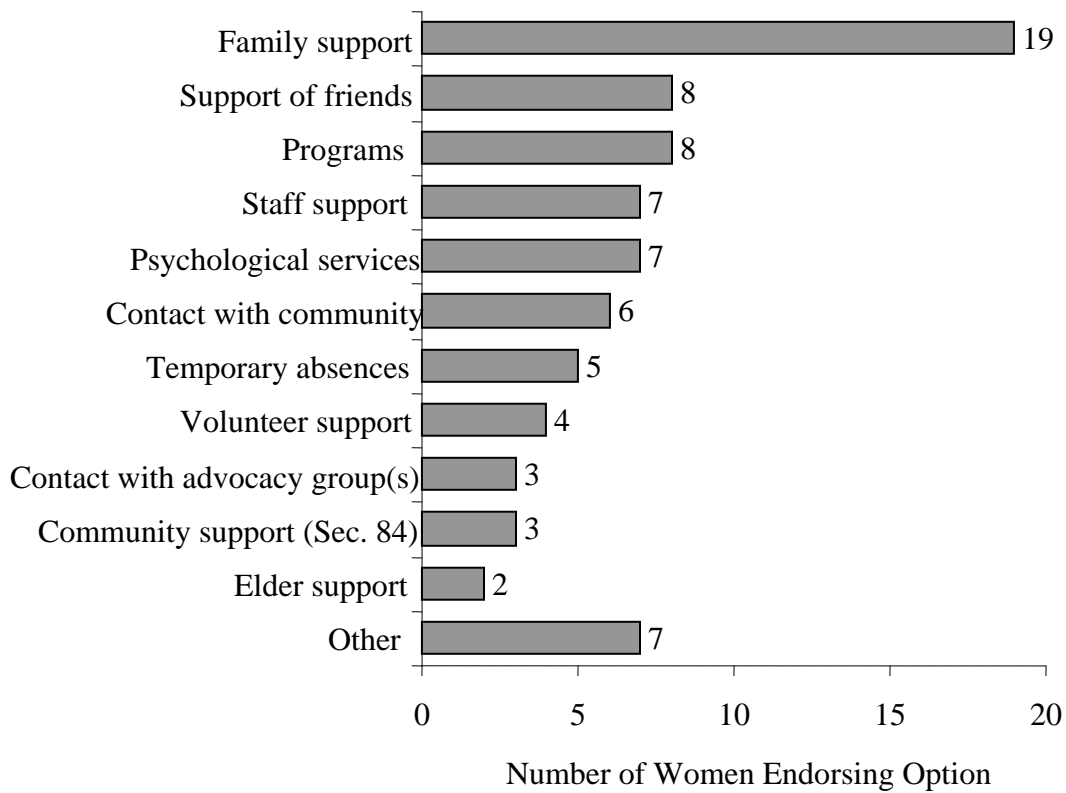
originally felt prepared for reintegration at release, but in hindsight thought that she had not been fully aware of all the challenges she would face. She used the analogy of marriage to explain her growing awareness: “You’re getting married, and you’re all excited, and then you’re living with this person and you realize, ‘Gee, I never thought of this and I never prepared for that.’” Together, these findings demonstrate that women who successfully reintegrated into the community had varied original perceptions of their abilities to do so.

Respondents who completed the survey were asked which factors (among a list of 11, plus an *other* option) helped them feel prepared for release. As shown in Figure 1, family support was by far the factor most endorsed by respondents, followed by institutional programs, support from friends, support from staff, psychological services, contact with the community, and *other* factors. Among the *other* factors, and among the factors listed as important by the interview respondents, were spirituality, determination in self, knowing what to expect, and having a private home placement rather than going to a halfway house. Though section 84 community support<sup>3</sup> and Elder support were mentioned relatively infrequently, their importance becomes more evident when considering the proportion of the survey sample which was Aboriginal (3 of 22 respondents; 13.8%). Though it is possible that non-Aboriginal women have chosen these options also, these findings suggest that Elder and community support were markedly important for a sub-group of respondents, likely those who are Aboriginal.

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<sup>3</sup> This term denotes a parole plan involving release facilitated by an Aboriginal community or organization.

Figure 1. Helpful Factors in Preparing for Transition, According to Survey Respondents



Note.  $N = 22$ .

Finally, women were asked about their level of confidence that they would never return to custody. The vast majority of respondents (though, notably, not all) indicated that they considered it very likely that they would not return to custody for any reason. As one woman wrote, “I won’t be suspended or revoked because I don’t do anything I shouldn’t.” Moreover, most women who were not perfectly confident in their ability to remain in the community indicated that they were doing their best in this regard. Respondents indicated that criminal behaviour was no longer consistent with the life they imagined for themselves. One summarized this feeling succinctly, saying, “I’ve changed the way I think about life and crime is not an option for me anymore.” In general, women reported looking forward to continuing to live a largely pro-social life. For many, this life involved relationships with family, partners, and children, and the potential consequences for these relationships associated with returning to crime were prohibitively serious. One respondent offered the following conclusion: “All I can say is that no matter what life throws at me, I’m going to do my best to maintain where I’m at

today, because it's not just about me, it's about my children, my family, and other people too."

### **Protective Factors**

The second major focus of this study was to examine the factors which women perceived to have facilitated their community reintegration. A number of themes emerged in this area, and they were grouped into four areas to facilitate discussion: attitude, interpersonal support, relationship with parole officer, and other factors. Most women, however, mentioned factors within a number of areas.

#### *Attitude*

Nearly all the women, when asked directly, indicated that they had made a conscious decision to live a crime-free life. A number of women even expressed that this was the most important factor in community reintegration. Many women also made a conscious decision to abstain from drugs and / or alcohol. One concisely expressed these ideas: "Staying out is a moment by moment choice." When asked for advice to share with other women who want to stay out, another respondent acknowledged that there is no "blanket response that is going to work for everybody" but went on to say that "really, it's just making the choice. You want to be out of prison? Don't do stupid things that will send you back." Many women also found it important to share their decision with others. These respondents indicated that sharing their decision with others allowed these others to provide them with support in attaining their goals. One woman explained that she "had to tell my doctors that I'm a drug addict – everybody had to know." She went on to explain that this approach served, in essence, to protect her from herself in the instance that she might have a moment of weakness later on. Others made similar statements with regards to having shared their decision with their family or romantic partner.

Other attitudinal factors such as determination, willpower, and personal strength also figured prominently in most women's discussions of factors which were helpful in the reintegration process. One woman, in talking about her determination and will-power, concluded that "it really is about attitude." A number of women talked about their "stubbornness." Women also spoke about staying focused on their goals, trusting their intuition or "the wisdom within", and remaining positive. With respect to the latter, one

respondent shared that the key to her reintegration was to remember that “every day is a success to be celebrated.”

The behaviour exhibited by many women pointed to other attitudinal traits which seem to have served them well: resourcefulness, adaptability, and flexibility. These traits were evident in a number of contexts. One woman shared a story which nicely illustrated her response to her difficulties in finding a job due to her criminal record. She stated that when she was continuously turned down for jobs, “what I started doing was sharing my life experience and using it as an example of how a person can move forward from all of that. I have landed myself a couple of really good jobs using my life experience alone.” Another respondent disclosed her use of an approach which exemplified creativity and resourcefulness in another domain. Given that she had returned to her home town upon release, where she had formerly had an extensive network of pro-criminal acquaintances, she began to “tell people I have a no-association clause [condition], just to keep people at bay and have them not come near me.” This tactic allowed her to break from the relationships which encouraged criminal behaviour without having to confront those involved. Other women also exhibited adaptability and flexibility in rebuilding their relationships with their partner, family, and / or children.

### *Interpersonal Support*

Relationships with partners, families, children, and others were another important factor facilitating reintegration for many of the respondents in this study. This was mentioned both in the context of preparing for release (as described earlier) and of maintaining reintegration within the community. One woman, in talking about finding support from a staff member, said, “if there’s someone you can grab a hold of, grab a hold of them and show them that you want to do this right and they’ll help you.” Indeed, when asked to provide advice or tips to other women preparing to reintegrate into the community, more than half of the respondents mentioned the importance of finding and using support. One recommended, “Surround yourself with loving and caring individuals.” Another suggested, “Make sure you have a support system in place before you are released.” Still another said simply, “Take all help!”

Families figured prominently as a source of support. Women reported that they received both practical and emotional support from their family members. A number of respondents reported returning to live with their family after their release. Others indicated that their families helped them financially or in terms of finding employment. Some respondents appreciated that spending time with their pro-social family members insulated them from risk factors; in this vein, one woman wrote that when she was first released, she always wanted a family member around because “then at least I know I’m safe.” A number of women also expressed that their family members were particularly helpful when they were facing challenging events. On the other hand, a number of respondents indicated that there were problems in relation to their families. In some cases, family members were using drugs and / or involved in criminal behaviour. More commonly, problems related to family members having difficulty recognizing the respondent’s commitment to a pro-social lifestyle and continued to begrudge the respondent her earlier behaviour. One woman explained that she “had to rebuild all my relationships with family.” In some cases, this issue could not be fully solved and it was necessary to “set boundaries with my family to help me to move on.” In others, however, families gradually came to recognize the woman’s progress, and this recognition served to strengthen the family bond.

Relationships with romantic partners were also very important to some respondents. One woman expressed this quite simply, “I have my husband, I have my family, I’m happy.” In cases where details were given, most romantic relationships were ones which had developed since the respondents’ release, and most relationships were with pro-social partners. These relationships were characterized as “a positive influence.” All but one relationship which existed prior to the women’s release were with a partner for whom no recent criminal history was mentioned. In the final case, one woman who was serving a long sentence married another offender also serving a long sentence while they were both incarcerated. The woman shared how when they were both still incarcerated, her husband once suggested committing a bank robbery together in order to fund their life. Her reaction was clear-cut: “I said, ‘Let me know now, because I’m out of here. I’m not planning to live with you once I’m out if you get a second charge.’” From this comment,

it is clear that the respondent was committed to building a pro-social relationship with her partner.

Women also appreciated the interpersonal support received from a variety of other sources, including other residents of the halfway house, co-workers, church members, Elders, friends, and parole officers.<sup>4</sup> Respondents generally appreciated both concrete and emotional help. A number of examples of concrete help were provided: holding a job or apartment until a woman's release, teaching a woman how to use public transportation or open a bank account, driving a woman to work or to appointments, and helping to prepare a résumé. In terms of emotional support, respondents were particularly appreciative of those who took the time to assure them that their experiences were normal, or to provide them with positive reinforcement regarding the gains they had made.

It was notable that relationships with children did not, generally speaking, seem to provide the women with practical support. This was not true in all cases; one woman spoke of the support provided by her eldest child. It is possible that some children were simply not in a position to provide the support needed by their mothers, either due to age or to other factors. Nonetheless, children were frequently a source of pro-social motivation. One woman shared the following: "I always promised myself that when I got out that I would work and do good for myself and my children." Another, in sharing advice for other women working towards reintegration, suggested that "women with children need to focus on the impact their absence has on their children." In this way, it seems that children provide a strong motivation and incentive not to return to criminal activity. Similarly, for some women, children were reinforcing of their reintegration efforts. In discussing the advantages of her choice not to re-offend, one respondent stated, "I have my kids with me, and it's great."

#### *Relationship with Parole Officer*

Women provided overwhelmingly positive feedback when asked to comment on their relationships with their parole officers. Nearly all the respondents indicated that their parole officer was either a positive influence or was not influential. Only two interview

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<sup>4</sup> Relationships with parole officers will be discussed separately in the next section.

respondents and one survey respondent stated that their parole officer had been a hindrance in their reintegration effort. In those few cases where the parole officer was seen negatively, the respondents explained that the parole officer was unprofessional, too directive, too strict, authoritarian, did not positively reinforce behaviour, or did not keep promises. One woman, when asked if there was anything else her parole officer could do that would be helpful, suggested that the officer “back off – I know what to do and I already have a mom and friends.” Another woman expressed frustration with having been on conditional release for two years without any breaches of condition, but still being obliged to meet with her parole officer weekly. She felt that it was past time to “loosen the reins” and reinforce her gains by reducing the frequency of her supervision meetings.

Respondents who felt that their parole officer was a positive influence commented that the officer was supportive and encouraging, gave them an appropriate amount of space, provided information when required, established good rapport, and was easy to communicate with openly and freely. Some women, like one who wrote, “she was proud of me and always patting me on the back,” particularly appreciated receiving positive feedback from their parole officers. Others felt that they established close working relationships with their supervising officers, such that the officer became “not only a parole officer but a friend.” One even wrote, “we actually miss him now that he’s not coming as often. There’s been talk of giving him a call and seeing if he wants to drop in for donuts.” Although women had a variety of other specific positive feedback about their parole officers, the over-arching theme seemed to be that they appreciated being treated respectfully. One woman’s comment captures this feeling: “She treated me as a person and not as a parolee.” Respondents were grateful when they were given the benefit of the doubt and treated considerately.

Notably, only one respondent shared that she “would recommend that females work with females.” Although most of the positive comments provided used a female pronoun, this was true of the negative comments also; this difference is likely simply attributable to the fact that women tend to be supervised by female parole officers. As such, though the question was not asked directly, these data suggest that there are not important

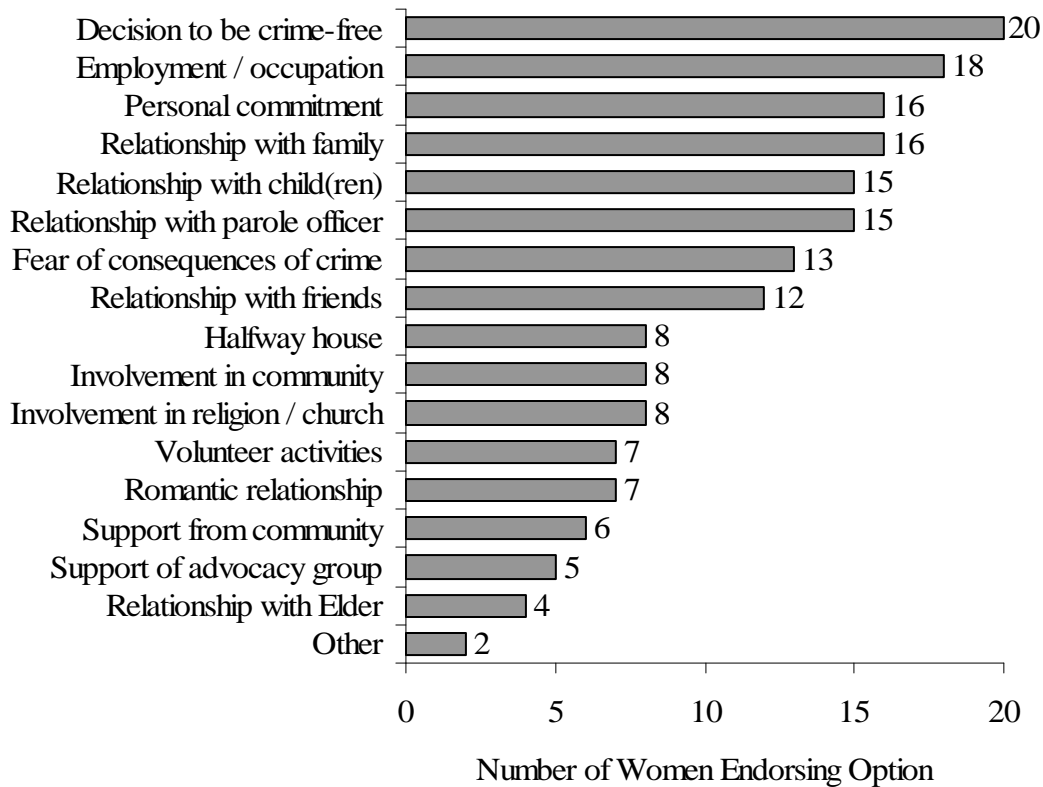


differences in quality of relationship with the parole officer according to the gender of the supervising officer.

### *Other Factors*

A number of additional factors were also identified. Among these were the importance of employment, of involvement in religion and church, and of the utilization of skills acquired through programming and counseling. Many women indicated that finding a job was of utmost importance, both because it kept them busy and because it provided them with the means to earn a living wage. Indeed, when the survey respondents were asked which factors (of a list of 16 options plus an *other* option) were most important to them in terms of facilitating reintegration, employment ranked second, after only the decision to be crime-free. As can be seen in Figure 2, a greater proportion of women endorsed employment than endorsed their relationship with their partner, their family, their children, or their friends. These findings, together with the fact that employment was also mentioned frequently by interview participants, serve to underscore the valuable role of employment within the reintegration process.

Figure 2. Most Important Factors in Remaining Crime-Free, According to Survey Respondents



Note. N = 22.

A number of other interesting findings become apparent upon examination of Figure 2. It is striking, though in keeping with earlier findings, that nearly three-quarters of the survey respondents indicated that their relationship with their parole officer was one of the most important factors in their community reintegration. It is also notable that the support provided by advocacy groups (e.g., Elizabeth Fry Association) and by Elders was very appreciated by a portion of the survey respondents. A final interesting result arising from these data is that the romantic relationship option was selected by fewer than a third of the women who completed the survey. This is at odds with what is known about the importance of relationships in reintegration for men (e.g., Sampson & Laub, 1993).

As can be seen in Figure 2, involvement in religion or church was mentioned by over a third of survey respondents. A portion of the interview respondents also appreciated their faith in and of itself. When asked for advice for other women attempting reintegration,

one respondent wrote that she would “advise women to get connected with a church in their community” right away. Another woman responded to the same question by saying, “To all the women, I have these simple words: Have faith in yourself and have faith in the Lord.” Others appreciated the support provided by their fellow church members. Conversely, however, one woman shared that when she attempted to join a local church, she was ostracized to such a point that she no longer attends worship services. This comment reinforces the importance, for religious women, of finding the *right* church or faith group.

A portion of respondents also cited programming, counseling, and community groups as important factors in their reintegration. Some women appreciated the programs offered during their stay at a halfway house, while others explored community options. One woman shared that after trying a variety of community services, she “stuck with an Aboriginal counseling service that was particularly helpful as I was able to see clearer.” A number of women developed working relationships with counselors, psychologists, or psychiatrists. Others joined and appreciated local Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous groups.

For some respondents, it was not the programs or counseling they completed in the community that were seen as valuable so much as the opportunity to practice the skills taught in institutional programs. One woman spoke of encouraging others in the halfway house where she resided, when they were considering using drugs or engaging in crime, to remind themselves of the “basics” they learned while incarcerated, of the routine and the skills. She indicated that women often found these suggestions helpful. Another woman spoke concretely of how she used her boundary setting and relationship skills in interacting with her family.

### **Other Comments**

From this summary, and as graphically presented in Figure 2, it is evident that for most women, numerous and varied factors were helpful in reintegrating from prison into the community. A number of women, however, took the time to share with us what was still needed to facilitate attempts to stay out. They also provided concrete advice and tips to other women beginning the same process.

## *Needs*

The most frequently mentioned gap in the current reintegration process was with regards to role models, mentors, or sponsors. One respondent described how she would “have greatly benefited from a mentor (someone female with lived experience) to talk to, to get out and do things with.” Another woman explained the model she envisioned: “I think women need, because we’re more social creatures and we need to talk things through, almost like in A.A. [Alcoholics Anonymous].” The approach used in Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve step programs is one where an individual who has established a measure of success in recovering from his or her addiction becomes the “sponsor” of another individual who is at an earlier stage of recovery. The sponsor provides practical and emotional support, advice, and help. When the sponsored party has demonstrated success in recovery, he or she may then sponsor another individual.

One respondent mentioned that there were community volunteers who visited the institution where she had resided in order to attempt to establish mentorship relationships. Although she thought this was a laudable initiative, she explained that this approach often didn’t work because women need “somebody that they can relate to rather than a square John that won’t understand and that would be shocked if they heard some of the things we had gone through.” Similarly, a number of respondents suggested that it would be beneficial to have “success stories” – that is, women who had successfully remained in the community without re-offending – come to the institutions and halfway houses to advise the women and to point them towards resources that could provide support upon release. This approach has the benefit of providing mentors with more credibility in the eyes of the women, given that these mentors have had readily accessible and relevant life experiences.

Women also mentioned that there needs to be more flexibility in the supervision and case management process. One woman explained that parole officers need to “find out who they [the women on their caseload] are and what they need, not just this is what we have for everybody. You can’t blanket a group of people like that, there’s too many variables.” Women explained that depending on their backgrounds, they might need more or less structure and more or less direct guidance. Indeed, those respondents who

were most pleased with their parole officers were those who felt that he or she met their unique needs.

Finally, women mentioned a number of specific additional resources which would be beneficial, such as “an employment program for individuals getting released” and stable and accessible housing for women released with limited institutional savings. One respondent suggested that there should be “something between the halfway house and the community,” a type of apartment-style housing with some staff presence for women requiring a more gradual reduction of structure. Another woman suggested that because halfway houses tend to take in a host of different types of women (that is, those under provincial and federal jurisdiction, women with past violence, women with mental health needs, women who are actively using drugs, etc.), and because being housed with such women can sometimes be challenging for women who truly want to reintegrate, it would be beneficial to expand the private home placement program. These placements allow women to serve their period of day release in the home of a community member who provides a pro-social influence. Other women suggested that it was necessary to have more halfway houses so women could be housed nearer to home, more mental health resources, and more resources for accompanying women to community referrals.

#### *Advice to Other Women*

Respondents were asked if they had any advice, hints, or tips for other women returning to the community and wanting to stay crime-free. By and large, women’s advice echoed their responses in other areas. They suggested that women should make a conscious decision to remain crime-free; should find and use support; should stay busy by finding a job, new friends, and hobbies; and should address addiction issues. With regards to making a choice, one woman’s comment was very direct: “They just have to want it.” A number of women implied that if a released person doesn’t consciously choose to remain crime-free, her chances of success are greatly diminished. In fact, only one woman who participated in this study did not report that she made a conscious decision to be either crime-free or drug-free. This finding makes intuitive sense, as it seems unlikely that someone who is not committed to a crime-free life would take steps to avoid returning to a criminal lifestyle.

Respondents also recommended that newly released women surround themselves with supportive persons, and that they work to establish their network of support persons prior to their release. Moreover, though “having positive community support is vital, one must utilize that support when experiencing difficulties.” In the same vein, respondents suggested that new releases stay away from non-supportive or pro-criminal friends and family, as well as from places they associated with their old behaviours. One woman proposed that others should “leave the familiar areas and people behind.” She explained that she “moved to a brand new city and province so that I would not run into people that I knew prior to being incarcerated. I gave myself a fresh new start.” While some other women did not suggest moving, they did recommend that women change their lifestyle significantly in order that familiar place, people, and things be eliminated.

Similarly, many of the women who shared advice suggested that their newly released counterparts should “stay busy.” More specifically, they suggested that newly released women should find a job as soon as possible, find new friends, and become involved in exercise and hobbies. Generally, women seemed to feel that making a choice, changing surroundings, and staying busy went hand-in-hand. As a caution in this area, however, one respondent warned other women to “stay away from romantic relationships for at least six months after release unless you are in a healthy one before release.”

Finally, women mentioned that addressing addiction was an important factor. A portion of respondents in this sample reported having had a problem with addiction; many who didn’t report such a history made comments about the importance of addiction for other women they’d known, and underlined that “if you do have addiction problems, [it is important to] in some way address them.” One respondent with first-hand experience explained why she felt fortunate to have been approved for a private family placement for day parole, rather than being placed in a halfway house: “Being surrounded by other addicts would have made the transition more difficult.” Another woman made her point even more poignantly: “It took me honestly every minute, every hour, of every day to fight the craving for drugs. It’s just overwhelming.” For these reasons, women suggested that others preparing for release ensure that they address their addiction and have supports in place in order to increase their chance of success once released.

## **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to examine challenges to community reintegration as well as factors facilitating reintegration, as perceived by women who had been successful in this endeavour. It is notable, however, that of the 152 women identified as eligible for participation in the study, feedback was received from only about one-fifth. As such, though the information in this report is informative and has several practical implications, it must not be considered representative of all women who have successfully reintegrated into Canadian communities.

### **Challenges to Reintegration**

Study participants shared that the time period immediately after release presented a considerable challenge for them in terms of their reintegration. Principle reasons for this were adjusting to life in the community after a period of incarceration and residing in a halfway house. In terms of adjustment, some women indicated that it took them some time to acclimatize to living in the community, especially if they had been incarcerated for an extensive period of time. Challenges associated with living in halfway houses revolved around the presence of drugs in the houses, their geographic distance from women's families and home communities, and the rules at the houses. These issues were also raised by women under provincial and federal community supervision who were interviewed by Shaw (1991), suggesting that some challenges associated with halfway houses have remained similar in this nearly twenty year period despite the opening of new women-specific accommodations.

Given women's feedback regarding halfway houses, it was somewhat surprising that most women provided positive feedback when asked whether they considered the special conditions associated with their conditional release to have been helpful in managing the challenges associated with conditional release. Participants indicated that they appreciated the structure provided by the conditions, as well as the implicit reminder of the consequences of any behaviours counter to conditions. Though a relatively small portion of women were ambivalent towards their special conditions or felt that their special conditions were a hindrance, this proportion was much smaller than was the case

in Shaw's (1991) earlier study. This difference clearly suggests some areas of the community reintegration process where progress has occurred.

Women also discussed specific challenging events, including traumatic experiences like the death of a loved one and events relating to their criminal activity. Some women faced lawsuits, substantial debt, or family-related issues as a result of their crime and / or period of incarceration. Most study participants also recounted facing considerable stigma upon their release. This finding is consistent with those of Dodge and Pogrebin (2001), Evans (2006), Leverentz (2006a), O'Brien (2001), and Shaw (1991), who all also reported that the label of *offender* or *ex-offender* impacted their study participants' ability to find work and housing. This issue has also been raised in studies of women recidivists; Harm and Phillips (2001), for instance, found that the stigma and shame of having been in prison contributing to a return to criminal behaviour among the women in their study. It is possible that those women who don't recidivate are those who find some way to surmount the obstacles posed by the stigma of a criminal record.

The finding that the initial post-release period was the most challenging is not surprising. A considerable portion of women indicated that they had not felt prepared to transition to the community upon their release, mainly due to feelings of anxiety or of being overwhelmed, to lack of knowledge, or to concerns regarding practical considerations such as clothing and transportation. These findings suggest that perception of preparation for transition may not have a clear relationship with post-release outcome, at least for some women who were successful in the process. Those who did feel prepared for release indicated the following reasons for their feelings: support from family, associates, and staff; institutional programs and psychological services; knowledge of what to expect; and spirituality. Most women found that as time elapsed after their release, the reintegration process became easier. This was partially because as time passed, women found ways to meet their basic needs (such as food and housing, as mentioned by other researchers; Austin, Bloom, & Donahue, 1992; Evans, 2006). Some women also explained that reaching full parole, and therefore being able to leave the halfway house and, in some cases, return to their partner or family, made the process easier.



## **Strengths and Protective Factors**

When women were asked about the factors which they perceived to have been helpful in facilitating their community reintegration, one of the most frequently mentioned factors was making a conscious decision to live a crime-free and / or drug-free life.<sup>5</sup> Women also often mentioned this factor when asked to provide advice to other women being released. This is consistent with the results of a previous study, in which the researchers found that women who do not re-offend tend to follow a predictable path: they develop a motivation to stop offending, make a public decision or declaration, and then work to maintain a modified identity, that of desister from crime (Sommers, Baskin, & Fagan, 1994). It is possible, therefore, that this idea was endorsed by such a large proportion of women because it is an early step in most women's paths to community reintegration.

Women also focused a great deal on the support they derived from their relationships, including those with their partners, families, children, and correctional staff. Though some research has shown differences in this domain according to ethnicity (Bresler & Lewis, 1983; Katz, 2000), the small numbers of women identifying as being non-Caucasian in this sample prevented similar analyses. Across the women in this study, families figured most prominently as a source of support, a finding which is consistent with that of Dodge and Pogrebin (2001), who found that family support was critical in the community reintegration process for women. Support from romantic partners was also mentioned, but not with the same frequency. It is unclear whether this is because a greater proportion of women were without a romantic relationship than were without family connections, or, as was the case in a study conducted by Leverentz (2006b), if non-romantic bonds were simply more important for women than were partner relationships. Regardless, families and partners were a source of both practical and emotional support. Children, on the other hand, provided much less practical support. Nonetheless, they played an important part in a number of women's transitions to the community, in that they provided motivation towards a pro-social lifestyle. Another study has similarly found that women often cite their children as motivation for

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<sup>5</sup> It is notable that this was one of the few areas where use of drugs (including alcohol) was frequently mentioned. Although women regularly mentioned that they had previously used substances, and also mentioned substance use in the context of issues that other newly released women would have to be conscious of, the theme appeared less consistently than expected in discussions of challenges and strengths.

abstaining from drugs (Harm & Phillips, 2001). Moreover, Benda (2005) reported that women with a greater number of children remain crime-free in the community longer than those with fewer, though the mechanism underlying this relationship is unclear.

Relationships with parole officers were also very important to the women in this study. In most cases, these relationships were positive and were marked by respect, flexibility, and encouragement. O'Brien (2001) found similar results in her investigation of American women, who described their relationships with their parole officers as positive when they were characterized by flexibility, non-intrusiveness, and respect.

Notably, in a Canadian study conducted almost two decades ago, only half of the women on day parole (and slightly more of those on full parole) were happy with their relationship with their parole officer (Shaw, 1991); this proportion is much smaller than that found in the present study (91%). Given that Shaw recruited from all women on conditional release, while this study focused on women who were "successful," this difference may be attributable to differences in the samples. It is also possible, however, that women have come to be more satisfied with their relationships with their parole officers during this time period. This interpretation has some support in the fact that considerable attention has come to be paid to community supervision of women, and to the use of women-centered approaches, during this time (CSC, 2002). If this interpretation is correct, such relationships may continue to be strengthened, as the Service has continued its efforts in this regard since this study was conducted.

Besides relationships, women also mentioned employment, involvement in religion or church, skills acquired through program participation, community support (including the help of advocacy groups), and Elders as important components in their reintegration. Employment was particularly critical, and was cited by almost every woman as a key element in her reintegration. Women appreciated employment for a number of reasons, including the associated ability to support themselves financially, the benefits in terms of keeping themselves busy, and the pro-social connotations of employment.

Much of the research on women offenders has focused specifically on relatively concrete factors such as relationships, families, employment, and addictions. Though research on protective factors conducted with men has come to include such additional intra-

individual factors as attitudes, cognitive shifts, and insight (Burnett & Maruna, 2004; Farrall & Bowling, 1999; Haggård, Gupert, & Grann, 2001), this focus is only beginning to be expanded to women. An exception in this regard was a study conducted by Giordano, Cernkovich, and Holland (2003), in which the researchers concluded that, among women, attitudinal shifts may be more important in the desistance process than more concrete factors such as employment and relationships. The present results suggest that this hierarchy may not be clear cut – both attitudinal factors such as the decision to be crime free and more concrete factors such as employment and relationships were endorsed by important proportions of women. It may be that this balance is quite individual, with different women benefiting more or less from different combinations of factors.

### **Limitations**

In interpreting the results of this study, a number of limitations must be borne in mind. Chief among these, and already mentioned, is the small number of women involved in the present study. Given that only about one-fifth of the women identified as eligible to participate actually did so, the present results cannot be considered representative of all women successfully transitioning to the community. A related point is that since two methods of data collection were used (i.e., interviews and surveys), and no procedures were used to prevent a woman from contributing via both modes, it is possible that the number of actual participants in this study is somewhat lower than it seems. If this is the case, some women's feedback may be over-represented in these findings, further contributing to the issue of generalizability.

Other potential difficulties with the current study arise from the methodology used. Women were asked to recall and share events and impressions occurring one to five years previously. Their responses may have been impacted by memory deterioration over time, and possibly an unequal deterioration, such that certain events or impressions were recalled and shared and others were not. It is for this reason that only women who had been in the community for less than five years were asked to participate in the study; however, the impact of such deterioration is not known in this context. A second issue arising from this methodology is that of socially desirable responding. It is possible that

some women may have responded in ways which they thought were more acceptable or desired or consistent with the researcher's expectations. It is hoped that the confidentiality associated with data collection would have served to minimize the influence of this response bias, but the extent to which this was the case is not clear.

### **Practical Implications**

Despite these limitations, the pattern of results arising from this study has a number of practical implications. First and foremost is that the constellation of challenges and protective factors discussed by each woman is both varied and extensive, demonstrating that women face a number of obstacles in their reintegration. As such, it is important to begin to work towards the identification and management of these obstacles as early as possible. The Women's Prison Association (2003) argues eloquently that planning for successful reintegration must begin on the first day of a woman's incarceration, and that each woman must be released with the arsenal of tools she will need to succeed in the community. Though this is the approach championed by the Correctional Service of Canada in its *Community Reintegration Strategy for Women Offenders* (2002), there is always room for improvement in such efforts. One component of this is continued efforts to coordinate with community-based agencies. Indeed, one study has found that of women on parole in the U.S., those who accessed community-based services (most notably, employment services) had lower rates of recidivism (Pearl, 1998).

The variability in challenges and protective factors unique to each woman also underscores the importance of demonstrating flexibility in the reintegration process. Again, this tactic echoes the community reintegration strategy, which explicitly lists creativity and flexibility as one its guiding principles (CSC, 2002). Flexibility is relevant in a number of areas, including parole supervision, as demonstrated by the parole officers who were positively viewed in the present study; the application of parole conditions, as suggested in a previous study (Shaw, 1991); and accommodation. The latter was mentioned by women in this study, and has also been the focus of ongoing attention within the Service. The Service, together with the National Parole Board, has been working to further develop the option of private home placements as an alternative to halfway houses. Though identifying and accrediting such placements is a lengthy

process (CSC, 2002), the comments made by women in this study regarding the difficulties associated with residing in a halfway house (presence of drugs, distance from home and loved ones) suggest that it may be one requiring further (and more immediate) attention.

A further point to arise from this study is the importance of mentors and role models. When asked what they needed to facilitate their reintegration, many women responded by indicating the need for a woman with relevant lived experience to act as mentor or sponsor. This finding was not wholly surprising – a number of other qualitative researchers have reported that women value relationships with their successful counterparts, as these individuals may be better able to provide support and empathy (Galbraith, 1998; Leverentz, 2006b; O'Brien, 2001). Mentorship programs have both been advocated (Rumgay, 2004) and employed (Vigilante et al., 1999) previously with women offenders. Vigilante and colleagues reported employing a peer worker component in an intervention with women offenders which led to a 12% reduction in recidivism, as measured after one year. In this study, however, other components were also present, and it is therefore impossible to know to what point these benefits were attributable to the mentorship relationship. Regardless, the women's interest in such relationships, combined with preliminary evidence supporting the use of formalized mentorship relationships in interventions, suggest that this may be an area worthy of further attention. At present, only for those serving indeterminate sentences has a process been formalized whereby some offenders, successfully under community release for a period of time, volunteer to assist their counterparts both in the institutions and in the community (i.e., Life Line; Task Force on Long Term Offenders, 1998). It may be of benefit to examine whether this model can be expanded to women offenders with shorter sentences.

## **Conclusion**

This study identified a number of challenges and protective factors in the reintegration process, as identified by women who had been successful in their return to the community after a period of federal incarceration. As such, it adds to the limited literature in the area of desistance, and provides fodder for our understanding of this

process. Such research complements that focused on recidivism to contribute to our comprehension of why, after contact with the criminal justice system, some individuals persist in crime and others desist. Moreover, this study contributes to a recent shift to concentrating on strengths as opposed to risk (e.g., Van Wormer, 2001). Traditionally, discussions of offenders have focused on the factors contributing to their risk of re-offending. By focusing on strengths, however, it can be acknowledged that most offenders have some positive attributes to contribute to the desistance equation. As Deguera (2004) wrote regarding the incorporation of a strengths-based approach in her parole supervision strategy, “by incorporating a strengths perspective, you can actually build on the positives the women already possess” (p. 50). Additionally, such an approach is very consistent with that espoused in *Creating Choices* (Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, 1990), the document which formalizes the Service’s guiding philosophy in working with women offenders. One of the five guiding principles detailed in this document is *empowerment*, whereby women are assisted to gain insight into their situation, identify their strengths, and to take action to take control of their lives. A strengths-based perspective generally, and a focus on protective factors specifically, fits very nicely against this background.

It is also notable that the completion of this study is particularly timely – recently, the Service has identified community transition as a major area of focus and has committed to specific measures relevant to women in this area, including updating the community strategy for women offenders and enhancing community transition services in the areas of supervision, accommodation, and intervention (CSC, 2007). It is hoped that the information collected within the framework of this study may contribute to these initiatives.

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## Appendix A. Participant Cover Letter

### Women's Protective Factors Study

Women Offender Research  
Correctional Service of Canada

The purpose of this study is to identify factors which assist women to remain in the community after release from a federal penitentiary. You have been selected for participation in this study because you have been under community supervision without a revocation for at least one year, and no more than five years. **However, if you have NOT remained crime-free since your release to the community, please do not participate in this study.** We would like to learn from your experiences how better we can assist women to remain in the community after release. Also, the information gathered in this study will be used to help inform policy and community reintegration strategies. Because we would like to learn from your experiences, **your input is very important to us.**

Please assist us by agreeing to participate in an interview focused on the factors which have assisted you to remain in the community. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes and will be scheduled at your convenience. You are under no obligation to participate, and you will not be rewarded in any way, nor will you incur any losses, for participating (or not) in the interview. The information you provide will be completely confidential and will not be used for any purposes other than those outlined above. Also, the interview will be conducted by a researcher from National Headquarters, and none of your responses will be shared with your parole officer. **In order to participate in the interview, please return the attached card indicating a phone number where you can be reached.** A researcher will contact you to schedule an interview, either by phone or in person, where feasible.

If you are unable to participate in the interview, you may still contribute by completing the attached survey. Again, you are under no obligation to complete the survey, but please remember that any information you provide will be used only to better understand how women can remain in the community after release. We would appreciate you sharing your experiences in this area. **Once you have completed the survey, please return it using the large stamped addressed envelope provided within two weeks of receipt.**

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or its components, please contact me directly:

Renée Gobeil  
Research Manager, Women Offender Research  
Research Branch, NHQ  
613-943-3175 (call collect)

**Appendix B. Survey**

**CHALLENGES TO REMAINING IN THE COMMUNITY**

1. Do you think you will remain in the community **for the next six months**?  
 No       Yes
  
2. Do you think you will remain in the community **for the next year**?  
 No       Yes
  
3. Do you think you will remain in the community **forever**?  
 No       Yes
  
4. Have you been finding it difficult to remain in the community without revocation?  
 No       Yes, sometimes       Yes, often
  
5. When you were released, what were your expectations regarding your ability to remain in the community? For example, did you expect it to be easy or hard? Did you think you would need help from others or did you think you would be able to do it alone? Did you think you would be able to do it?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
6. When you were released, did you feel prepared for your transition to the community?  
 No       Yes
  - a. Was there something in particular which helped you prepare for your transition while you were incarcerated?

<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer support	<input type="checkbox"/> Staff support
<input type="checkbox"/> Family support	<input type="checkbox"/> Support of friends
<input type="checkbox"/> Elder support	<input type="checkbox"/> Contact with community
<input type="checkbox"/> Psychological services	<input type="checkbox"/> Contact with advocacy group(s)
<input type="checkbox"/> Temporary absences	<input type="checkbox"/> Community support (i.e., Section 84)
<input type="checkbox"/> Program(s)	

*Please specify:* \_\_\_\_\_

 Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you have any special conditions associated with your release?

No       Yes

a. Would you say these conditions are helping you in your release?

No       Yes       Not applicable

b. If applicable, can you comment on how you feel your conditions are or are not helping? Which are most helpful?

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8. Did you make a conscious decision to not engage in criminal activity?

No       Yes

a. If so, did you share this decision with others?

No       Yes

9. What time period has been most challenging for you in your transition to the community? Please check as many as apply.

Immediately after release       First few months after release  
 6-12 months after release       More than one year after release  
 Other:

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a. Why was this time period most challenging?

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10. Have there been life events which have made it particularly difficult for you in your transition to the community? Please check as many as apply.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of a job                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Change of job / occupation     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Start of a new romantic relationship | <input type="checkbox"/> End of a romantic relationship |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Return to an abusive relationship    | <input type="checkbox"/> Death of a loved one           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Birth or getting custody of a child  | <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of custody of a child     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Illness or accident                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Unexpected expenses            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Moving house or city                 |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other:                               |   |

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a. How did you manage to stay in the community when faced with these events?

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11. Are there other factors which have been especially difficult for you in terms of your transition to the community?

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Friend(s) involved in crime | <input type="checkbox"/> Family involved in crime |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Needing extra money         | <input type="checkbox"/> Neighbourhood            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Community                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Other:                   |

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12. How would you describe the influence of your parole supervisor in contributing to your successful reintegration to the community?

- Positive influence  Negative influence  No influence

a. If a positive influence, how has he or she been helpful?

- Someone to talk to
- Someone who cares about your behaviour
- Provides structure
- Provides services, such as housing referrals
- Provides information you need
- Provides referrals to people who can help
- Other:

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b. If a negative influence, how was he or she unhelpful?

- Not available to talk to
- Does not care about your behaviour
- Does not provide structure
- Does not provide services, such as housing referrals
- Does not provide information you need
- Does not provide referrals to people who can help
- Other:

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c. Are there ways that your parole supervisor could be **more** helpful?

- No, he or she is helpful enough
- Be available more often
- Provide more information or referrals
- Other:

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13. Have you previously had a release revoked (either for technical reasons – that is, due to breaching conditions – or because you were charged with a new offence)?

- No       Yes

a. If so, what has changed to make it easier for you to remain in the community this time? Please check as many as apply.

- Nothing
- You have more social support
- You have a job / occupation
- You have gained custody of a child
- You are drinking / using drugs less or not at all
- You have a better understanding of your risk factors
- You spend less time in high risk situations
- You feel you have more to lose this time
- Other:
- You are more committed
- You have a new romantic relationship
- You have ended a romantic relationship
- You have lost custody of a child

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14. Do you have any concerns about your ability to continue to stay in the community and not return to custody?

- No       Yes

a. If so, please share your concerns with us.

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15. Please share any advice, tips, or hints you might have for women who are preparing for their release that might help them to remain in the community.

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16. We are interested to know what factors you think have been **most important** for you in remaining in the community. The following is a list of potential factors – please check the ones which you think have been particularly helpful or important to you. You may check as many as you like.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Romantic relationship   | <input type="checkbox"/> Relationship(s) with children    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Relationship with other family  | <input type="checkbox"/> Relationship with friends        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Relationship with Elder   | <input type="checkbox"/> Relationship with parole officer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Support of advocacy group(s)  | <input type="checkbox"/> Residence in a halfway house     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Support from community (i.e., Section 84 plan)                                  |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Involvement in community group(s)   | <input type="checkbox"/> Involvement in religion / church |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Involvement in volunteer activities   | <input type="checkbox"/> Employment / occupation          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Decision to be crime-free   | <input type="checkbox"/> Personal commitment              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fear of consequences of involvement in criminal activity (e.g., jail, violence) |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other:  |   |

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## **DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

There are suggestions that factors helping women stay in the community affect women differently depending on characteristics such as race, age, and offence history. The questions below are being asked so we can investigate this possibility. If you prefer not to answer any of these questions, you may feel free to skip them.

1. What is your ethnicity?

- Caucasian    Aboriginal                       Black                       Other

2. How old are you?

- Under 25    25-34             35-44             45-54             55 or over

3. What region are you in?

- Atlantic     Ontario     Quebec     Prairies     Pacific

4. For what type of offence are you serving your current sentence? Please check all that apply.

- Property    (e.g., theft, break and enter, fraud)  
 Drug        (e.g., trafficking, production)  
 Violence    (e.g., assault, arson, manslaughter, murder)  
 Other

5. How long ago were you released?

- Less than 1 year                       1-2 years                       2-3 years  
 3-4 years                                       More than 4 years

6. Was this your first federal conviction?

- Yes             No

## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

Please share with us any other information which may be helpful to understanding the factors which help women to remain in the community after release from a federal facility. *(Please use the back of this sheet)*

## **Appendix C. Semi-Structured Interview**

### **Background Questions**

We would like to start the interview by gathering some background information on you. We're asking these questions because there are suggestions that the factors which help women remain in the community differ according to demographic characteristics. Please feel free to skip any of these questions if you wish to do so.

1. How long is your sentence?
2. How long have you been under community supervision?
3. For what type of offences were you convicted?
4. What is your ethnic background?
5. How old are you?

### **Feelings about Desistance**

6. Prior to your release, did you feel prepared to return to the community? Did you feel prepared to transition to the community without being re-incarcerated?
7. What has influenced you to stop engaging in criminal activity?
8. Did you make a conscious decision to stop engaging in criminal activity? If so, what prompted your decision? Did you share your decision with others? Who?

### **Challenges to Desistance**

9. Was there something in prison that helped you prepare for your transition to the community? (e.g., volunteer services, reintegration programs, Elder services, community advocacy group outreach)
10. Are you finding it difficult to stay in the community? Do you worry about having your release revoked?
11. Is it becoming easier (or harder) over time?
12. Were there particular time periods that were especially difficult in terms of staying out? (e.g., right after release; when your supervision requirements became more lenient)
13. Have there been specific events which have made it challenging to stay out? (e.g., gaining or losing custody of a child, gain or loss of a job, death of a loved one)
14. What other challenges have you had in terms of staying out? (e.g., friends and family who are involved in criminal activity, need for financial stability, assumptions on others' part that you would return to a criminal lifestyle)
15. Are there any special conditions associated with your conditional release? If so, which ones? How are they impacting your ability to remain in the community? (i.e., are they making it easier or harder?)

### **Factors Supporting Desistance**

16. Tell me what you think a woman needs to be offence-free and stay that way? What do you think you need to stay out of trouble?
17. How do you get these things you need to stay out of trouble? Do you do it on your own? Does your PO help or hinder you?
18. Do you think your PO has been helpful in supporting you in remaining in the community?
19. In your experience, what can best help someone stay out?
20. Do the following factors play a role in your remaining crime free and revocation free? If so, how?
  - a. Personal qualities about you (e.g., determined, strong, etc)
  - b. Your relationship with your family?
  - c. Your relationship with friends?
  - d. Your relationship with community members, including Elders?
  - e. The help of community organizations, such as advocacy groups?
  - f. Your job / occupation?
  - g. Your other activities, such as volunteering or educational pursuits?
  - h. Any other factors?
21. Have you tried before to stop engaging in criminal activity? If so, what is different this time?
22. What do you think has to happen for you never to return to custody?
23. How confident are you that you will never go back to prison? Please rate this on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = not at all confident; 10 = sure that you will never return).
24. Do you have any advice you could share with other women who want to stay out?

### **Additional Information**

25. We are interested in knowing about challenges you have faced, things you have found helpful, or any other information you think might be relevant to this study and might help other women. Do you have any other comments regarding staying in the community which you could share with us?