

Classifying female offenders for correctional interventions

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The ultimate goal of Canadian corrections is the management of risk and its subsidiary, criminogenic need.² Offender risk is evaluated by identifying and then assessing the variables that contribute to unlawful behaviour. Offenders vary across several dimensions including the precursors to, and consequences of, their criminal behaviour, as well as their response to incarceration and treatment. A comprehensive assessment serves a variety of purposes, ranging from security classification through treatment planning and responsivity to pre-release risk evaluation. Thus, assessment of both static and dynamic risk/needs factors³ should occur throughout an offender's sentence. This provides for appropriate classification and contributes specific information to the offender's correctional plan. This article provides an overview of current assessment and classification practices with female offenders.

In the past, female offenders received little empirical attention compared to their male counterparts. This is particularly true in the area of objective offender assessment procedures. This trend is changing as research interest in female offender classification and assessment has grown.

While most classification instruments have been developed for use with males, some, such as the Case Management Strategies and the Level of Service Inventory — Revised, are also consistently and reliably used with female offenders. This is particularly noteworthy since offender assessment plays an important role in correctional programming and management.

Intake assessment

All federal offenders undergo a comprehensive and integrated Offender Intake Assessment process (OIA). The OIA has several subcomponents: community intake assessment, initial assessment, criminal risk assessment, case needs identification and analysis, psychological and supplementary assessments, and a criminal profile. The OIA process was first implemented in November 1994. It provides a summary of special concerns (if any), offender treatment needs and treatability, and perceived risk to reoffend.

The community intake subcomponent outlines critical concerns (if any) and includes police, forensic and institutional records. The initial assessment covers sentence administration and security information,

medical history and examination, mental health status, and suicide risk and potential. Assessment of criminal risk encompasses the offender's criminal history record (including youth court, previous adult convictions and current offences), detention criteria and any other related factors. Case Needs Identification and Analysis (CNIA) queries seven potential need areas, including employment/education, marital/family relations, associates (criminal versus non-criminal), substance abuse, community functioning, personal/emotional orientation and attitudes. Psychological and supplementary assessments are tailored to the offender and might cover specific concerns and needs areas. Finally, a criminal profile is constructed, providing a narrative description of the current offence.

Security classification

In Canada, offenders sentenced to periods of incarceration of two years or more serve their time in federal institutions. Alternatively, those sentenced to less than two years are under provincial jurisdiction and are incarcerated in provincial facilities. Until recently, Canada had only one federal prison for female offenders, the Prison for Women (P4W) in Kingston. The P4W is a maximum security prison and, as a result (with few exceptions), women sentenced to two years or more served their sentence at the P4W, regardless of their security classification.

Some authors⁴ have questioned the value of assessing and classifying federally sentenced women for security placement since they were housed together in a single institution. However, since five new federal prisons have been built for women offenders, the issue of assessment for security classification has become a primary concern.

In 1988, the Correctional Service of Canada introduced the Custody Rating Scale (CRS) to classify federal offenders for security in an objective, standardized manner. The CRS consists of two independently scored subscales: the Institutional Adjustment subscale (five items) and the Security Risk subscale (seven items). Potential scores range from 0 to 186 points on the Institutional Adjustment subscale and from 17 to 190 points of the Security Risk subscale. As scores increase on either subscale,

a higher security classification is predicted. Cutoff values of the CRS are designed so offender classification renders 15% of offenders as minimum security, 73% as medium security and 12% as maximum security.

A recent report⁵ demonstrated the CRS to be a reliable and valid classification tool with practical utility for both male and female offenders. It is interesting to note that total average CRS scores were identical (111.6) for both men and women. With a sample of 65 female offenders, the researchers demonstrated that CRS classifications were concordant with penitentiary placement decisions 100% of the time.

Needs assessment and correctional programming

Research has affirmed that the needs of female offenders are diverse, ranging from employment and education deficits, to marital and family problems, and alcohol and drug addictions. Although many of these needs are similar to those shown by male offenders, research shows that female offenders also possess disparate needs and need priorities.

For instance, while male inmates have a higher prevalence of mental disorder than men and women in the general population,⁶ female inmates have a higher prevalence of mental disorder than men and women, in general, and incarcerated men.⁷ This is especially true for serious psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, as well as for diagnoses such as depression, anxiety disorders and drug dependence problems. Although mental disorder per se is not directly associated with criminality or recidivism, other emotional health needs of female offenders warrant intervention and appear to be criminogenic in nature.

One study,⁸ for example, demonstrated that a history of attempted suicide was the strongest predictor of violent recidivism in a sample of federally sentenced women; another⁹ found much higher rates of self-injury in women recidivists than non-recidivists. This is especially noteworthy considering that almost 50% of the federal female offender population has a history of attempted suicide (compared to less than 15% of the male offender population).¹⁰ Although past self-injury or attempts at suicide reflect static risk factors, it is feasible that current or future self-destructive behaviour enhances a prediction of recidivism. These reflect dynamic needs that are amenable to treatment. There is a good possibility that prospective research will demonstrate these needs as only criminogenic to female offenders.

The OIA process includes a structured needs assessment protocol called the Case Needs Identification and Analysis (CNIA). It evaluates offenders on seven need areas (target domains), with multiple indicators for each domain. These include: employment (35 indicators), marital/family (31 indicators), associates/social interaction (11 indicators), substance abuse (29 indicators), community functioning (21 indicators), personal/emotional orientation (46 indicators) and attitude (24 indicators). CNIA classifies offenders within each domain on a four-point continuum, ranging from “asset to community functioning” to “considerable need for improvement.” As such, the CNIA can be used as a tool to identify and assess the priority of treatment needs.

Table 1 outlines percentage distributions of the CNIA target domains for federally sentenced women at admission. It includes all federal women offenders who have been assessed by the CNIA since its implementation in November 1994.

The majority of federally sentenced women present some type of substance abuse problem at admission. Moreover, almost 90% demonstrate either “some” or “considerable” need for improvement in the personal/emotional domain. Like their male counterparts, they also show significant education/employment problems and marital/family difficulties. Fortunately, all the target domains (though not necessarily all the indicators within them) reflect needs that are criminogenic and amenable to intervention. As more indicators are endorsed within each particular target domain, the likelihood of that area scoring higher along the continuum and falling within the “some” or “considerable” need for improvement area increases. Table 2 demonstrates the relationship between the number of domain

Table 1

Identification of Needs of Federally Sentenced Women at Admission (n=182)

Need Areas	Asset to community adjustment (%)	No immediate need for improvement (%)	Some need for improvement (%)	Considerable need for improvement (%)
Education/Employment	14.3	12.1	48.9	24.7
Marital/Family	8.8	20.9	47.3	23.1
Associates	8.8	10.4	63.7	17.0
Substance abuse	n/a	37.9	23.6	38.5
Community functioning	13.7	17.0	58.8	10.4
Personal/Emotional	n/a	12.1	52.2	35.7
Attitude	17.6	52.7	20.9	8.8

Table 2

Relationships between Risk/Needs Level Rating and Domain Indicators for Federally Sentenced Women (n = 182)

Indicators	Risk/Needs Level						
	E	F	A	SA	CF	PE	At
Employment (E)	.44 ^d	.04	.16 ^a	.16 ^a	.17 ^a	.14	.07
Family (F)	.23 ^b	.24 ^b	.04	.14	.05	.17 ^a	-.05
Associates (A)	.36 ^d	.15 ^a	.30 ^d	.14	.14	.22 ^b	.10
Substance abuse (SA)	.24 ^b	.20 ^b	.20 ^b	.55 ^d	.07	.26 ^c	.13
Community functioning (CF)	.38 ^d	.09	.13	.09	.23 ^b	.21 ^b	.07
Personal/Emotional (PE)	.31 ^d	.16 ^a	.13	.22 ^b	.08	.35 ^d	.18 ^a
Attitude (At)	.32 ^d	.19 ^b	.28 ^c	.31 ^d	.09	.33 ^d	.38 ^d

Note: ^a p < 0.5; ^b p < 0.01; ^c p < 0.001; ^d p < 0.0001

indicators and the risk/needs level as identified on the four-point continuum.

As expected, all correlations along the diagonal show a positive and statistically significant relationship. This confirms that the CNIA is being appropriately applied since a higher risk/needs level is suggested as more indicators are endorsed. Also, a high level of education/employment need is associated with endorsement of indicators in other domains.

According to one interpretation, if an offender shows a considerable need for improvement in the education/employment domain, it is likely that she has serious problems in other areas as well.

The Community Risk/Needs Management Scale (CRNMS), the predecessor to CNIA, contains 12 target domains for assessing criminogenic needs at and after release into the community. The CRNMS was first implemented in 1990 to assess risk and establish standards for community supervision. Table 3 provides a percentage distribution of CRNMS target domains for a sample of 175 federally sentenced women on conditional release.

A comparison of Table 1 and Table 3 indicates that federally sentenced women have higher levels of need at admission than at discharge. However, this does not necessarily mean that needs diminish (for example, through treatment) through the offender's term of incarceration. These data were extracted from two different samples, and might be interpreted to mean that offenders with lower criminogenic needs are more likely to be released.

Although there is very little pertinent research available, investigations into treatment effectiveness with female offenders have shown ambiguous results.¹¹ More specifically, there is little or no evidence that institutional programming reduces recidivism in released

female offenders. This was also demonstrated in a recent literature review on "exemplary" community programs for federally sentenced women,¹² where it was determined that programs available to women tend to be not only structured for men but also ill-adapted to women.

On a more positive note, it can be argued that there is no evidence which shows that treatment programs for female offenders are ineffective. Moreover, implementing structured needs assessment protocols, and gradually refining their utility in program planning and risk prediction, might greatly enhance the ability of tailored programming to reduce risk in female offenders.

Table 3

Identified Needs of Federally Sentenced Women after Release (n = 175)

Need Areas	Asset to community adjustment (%)	No immediate need for improvement (%)	Some need for improvement (%)	Considerable need for improvement (%)
Academic/Vocational	n/a	65.7	29.1	5.1
Employment	12.0	44.6	36.6	6.9
Financial management	10.2	54.0	26.1	9.7
Marital/Family	21.1	44.6	24.6	9.7
Companions	25.6	45.3	25.0	4.1
Accommodation	19.0	65.5	12.6	2.9
Behavioural/Emotional	n/a	56.3	33.0	10.8
Alcohol use	n/a	89.1	8.6	2.3
Drug use	n/a	89.7	8.6	1.7
Mental ability	n/a	95.4	4.0	0.6
Health	n/a	76.7	18.8	4.5
Attitude	36.2	55.7	6.3	1.7

Note: n/a: not applicable.

Risk assessment and recidivism

Needs and risk assessments are commensurate as both direct correctional management strategies. Traditionally, risk assessments encompass both risk and criminogenic need variables. However, the needs component is amenable to intervention and thus serves to guide and tailor treatment strategies.

At both provincial and federal corrections levels, objective actuarial instruments¹³ are customarily employed in risk assessment. The Level of Service Inventory — Revised (LSI-R)¹⁴ is routinely used in both jurisdictions. The LSI-R is the most extensively researched classification instrument in North America. It is unique because it was tested and norms were established for both male and female offenders (956 and 1,141, respectively). Proven valid and reliable for both groups, it has demonstrated utility in predicting security placement, institutional adjustment and placement in segregation, parole selection and violations, halfway house placement and various measures of postrelease outcome.

A recent study¹⁵ administered the LSI to a large sample (n = 526) of female offenders serving sentences of less than two years. Results suggested that cutoff scores based on male norms do not work with female offenders. The average LSI score for the sample was 15.5; average scores for similarly situated males ranged from 20.9 to 25.1. The authors constructed five risk categories so approximately 20% of the sample scores could be classified into each level. Statistical analyses revealed a consistent increase in recidivism as the LSI risk level increased.

This is the first documented application of the LSI to a large sample of female offenders in a longitudinal design study. Although results point to the utility of the LSI in classification and risk prediction with female offenders, they also highlight the need for distinct risk categories for this group. It is hoped that further research will further elucidate the viability of this suggestion.

Case Management Strategies (CMS) is an assessment instrument originally developed to provide probation officers with information that would aid in case-appropriate intervention. Although CMS considers a variety of information sources, the major component is a semistructured interview with questions developed to elicit attitude information about the offence, and the offender's background and present plans and problems. The CMS interview is generally conducted as a component of the offender intake process. The interview record is a standardized 71-item schedule surveying offender attitudes, objective history, behavioural observations and the officer's impression of contributing factors.

In an innovative investigation,¹⁶ researchers employed CMS to extract particular items and construct composite risk scores for each general and violent recidivism in a sample of 81 released federal female offenders. Overall, composite risk scores accounted for 48% and 45% of the explained variance in general and violent recidivism, respectively. The results demonstrated that estimates of risk for reoffending can be derived from objective measures of risk. Moreover, these measures can be manipulated and tailored to specific groups, such as federal women offenders.

Discussion

Assessment and classification paradigms are composites or reformulations of what we already know about variables pertaining to risk and need. Comprehensive assessment and classification of all offenders are paramount for appropriate security placement, treatment and risk prediction.

Proper security classification identifies low risk offenders, allowing for more humane and cost-effective alternatives to incarceration. Moreover, funding could be reallocated to tailored programming strategies for higher risk offenders. Preliminary findings support the use of the CRS in classifying female offenders. Prospective research will evaluate its utility as a predictive tool (for example, institutional incidents) for this particular group.

There is solid evidence that our current risk/needs assessment instruments are both reliable and valid for female offenders. However, the evaluation of women offenders should also address issues that might be particularly relevant to their success or failure on release (such as incidents of self-injury or attempted suicide). Although the CNIA and the CRNMS include suicide/self-injury as an indicator of personal/emotional problems, it is suggested that more consideration be allotted to this variable when dealing with women offenders. It may have powerful predictive potential. Additionally, marital/family problems may be key indices to forecasting postrelease outcome. For example, women offenders are much more likely than their male counterparts to be charged with child care responsibilities. This is significant when one considers that most actuarial instruments fail to consider full-time child rearing as significant "employment."

While current assessment tools appear to be accurate in identifying risk and need variables for female offenders, there is still room for improvement. As demonstrated with CMS, our current classification repertoire can be improved by tailoring the

instruments to ensure that they are particularly relevant to the group of interest.

Dynamic risk prediction involves the assessment and reassessment of various risk and need factors on a regular basis (for example, every six months). One final suggestion is that predictive accuracy will be

enhanced with more current assessment of dynamic variables. This would mean regularly assessing variables that might change over time, so risk prediction is based on the most current information available. ■

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- ² Criminogenic needs reflect risk factors of the offender that are changeable and, when modified, reflect changes in the likelihood of recidivism.
- ³ Static factors are characteristics of the offender that cannot be changed (examples include gender and criminal history). Dynamic factors are characteristics of the offender that are changeable and may be targeted for intervention (examples include procriminal attitudes, education and substance abuse problems).
- ⁴ P. Burke and L. Adams, *Classification of Women Offenders in State Correctional Facilities: A Handbook for Practitioners* (Washington: U.S. Department of Justice, 1991).
- ⁵ F.P. Luciani, L.L. Motiuk and M. Nafekh, *An Operational Review of the Custody Rating Scale: Reliability, Validity, and Practical Utility* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1996).
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- ⁷ K. Blanchette, "The Relationships between Criminal History, Mental Disorder, and Recidivism among Federally Sentenced Female Offenders," Unpublished master's thesis (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1996).
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- ¹⁰ A. Loucks and E. Zamble, "Some Comparisons of Female and Male Serious Offenders," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 6, 1 (1994): 22-25.
- ¹¹ Blanchette and Motiuk, *Female Offender Risk Assessment*. See also Bonta, Pang and Wallace-Capretta, *Predictors of Recidivism*.
- ¹² M. Dauvergne-Latimer, *Exemplary Community Programs for Federally Sentenced Women: A Literature Review* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1995).
- ¹³ Actuarial measures use empirically derived predictor variables in combination such that their statistical association with recidivism is maximized. In the context of risk assessment, actuarial measures yield a value within a possible range of scores, with a higher score suggesting a greater likelihood of recidivism.
- ¹⁴ D.A. Andrews and J. Bonta, *The Level of Service Inventory — Revised* (Toronto: Multi-Health Systems, 1995).
- ¹⁵ G. Coulson, G. Ilacqua, V. Nutbrown, D. Giulekas and F. Cudjoe, "Predictive Utility of the LSI for Incarcerated Female Offenders," *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 23, 3 (1996): 427-439.
- ¹⁶ Blanchette and Motiuk, *Female Offender Risk Assessment*.