

Gender Responsive Programming for Female Offenders

by

Alana Van Gundy-Yoder, Ph.D.

The Problem

Female offenders evidence differences from male offenders in their journey into the criminal justice system, their risks and needs within the system, and reentry into society. Despite evidence supporting critical gender differences in criminal behavior, the criminal justice system has failed to provide gender responsive programs addressing the distinct needs of females.

Women constitute the fastest growing segment of the incarcerated offender population, although they represent only seven percent of the total population. Female offenders are portrayed within the media as violent, predatory, and aggressive, leading the general public to view this new type of offender as more “masculine” in nature. In reality, the majority of females that are incarcerated have been convicted of nonviolent offenses, drug offenses, or as an accessory to a crime. In contrast, incarcerated males are more likely to have been convicted of violent offenses and multiple charges. Males are also more likely to be a major dealer in a drug enterprise, more likely to have used a gun or weapon, and are more often the lead perpetrator in crime commission in comparison to female offenders.

Despite these differences in criminal pathways, risk assessment tools, best practices, and treatment programs created for male offenders are utilized to respond to female offenders. As of 2001, almost 75 percent of all states continued to use a male risk assessment instrument in order to classify female offenders’ risk levels. As a result of incorrect classification, female offenders are placed in higher security prisons than necessary, are not provided gender responsive treatment, and are submitted to unsuccessful, ill-fitting procedures and processes.

Inferior classification assessments and male models of incarceration have resulted in largely ineffective programs and treatments for female offenders. Multiple levels of research have suggested that gender responsive programming is key to addressing this rapid increase of females in corrections. These programs must include components focusing on needs specific to female offenders.

The lack of gender responsive programming and treatment makes transition and reentry an increasing challenge to female offenders. Female offenders reentering the community often face significantly different gender related barriers than male offenders. As a result of the neglect of gender differences in criminal behavior and treatment needs, females often lack successful coping mechanisms and skill sets with which to reenter society.

The Research Evidence

Research by criminologists and sociologists have identified key differences between male and female offenders.

These findings concern the etiology of criminal behavior, characteristics of offenders, and specific programming needs. Addressing these differences improves treatment programs, services, and success upon reentry.

Female offenders face issues specific to their gender. These often include histories of childhood and adult physical and sexual abuse, and ongoing primary caregiving responsibilities. Incarcerated females are three times as likely to have been the victim of physical or sexual abuse as incarcerated males. Female offenders are less likely to have a criminal history, commit murder, or a violent offense against a stranger. Their crimes are often relationally oriented or committed against someone with whom they previously had a relationship.

Three fourths of incarcerated females have a drug or substance abuse problem. They also evidence high rates of trauma and physical and mental health issues. As they are often of marginal social status, they come to incarceration facilities with depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, poor nutrition habits, reproductive issues, and high-risk pregnancies. As a result of sexual and physical abuse, they often have symptoms of psychological trauma such as low self-esteem, panic attacks, and flashbacks. They are also fifty percent more likely to be HIV positive than male offenders and are at increased risk for breast cancer, cervical cancer, and heart disease. The disproportionate incarceration rates of women of color also mandates programming that addresses the diverse needs of socially marginalized racial and ethnic groups.

Without gender responsive classification systems, these life circumstances are neglected and female inmates are inaccurately classified and assessed. Female offenders' issues often accelerate in incarceration facilities as a result of placement in inappropriate security classifications (women are over-classified based upon a male model), inaccurate assessments of their life histories, and unsuitable treatment programs.

A national survey sponsored by the National Institute of Justice found that administrators have also identified numerous concerns related to female offenders. State, prison, and jail administrators report that classification, screening, and assessment tools used within the facilities are not adapted to women and are inadequate at matching women to an appropriate treatment program. They also cite the need for a management style that responds to the emotional needs of offenders, including active listening techniques, awareness of emotion, and patience in explaining rules and regulations. Administrators note the need for interagency contracting and programming and the utilization of programs that focus on specific elements of females' lives, such as substance abuse, violence and abuse, lack of job skills, and the inability to form and maintain appropriate relationships. The rapid increases in female incarceration, due to policy changes, have led to severe overcrowding of facilities and attendant problems. Correctional administrators, as well as social scientists, strongly recommend the use of alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent female offenders.

Research shows that appropriate classification methods and gender responsive screening will result in numerous benefits for correctional facilities and possibly reduced recidivism rates. These benefits include a better understanding of the following: offender demographics, reasons for female criminality, gender role implications, the importance of parenting and parenting skills

within the lives of female offenders, psychological and developmental differences, implications of prior victimization, the healing process for females with regards to substance abuse and trauma, and physical and mental health issues.

In other countries, gender responsive strategies designed exclusively for females have been highly successful. One example is the Real Women Acquisitive Offender Programme in the United Kingdom. This pilot program was designed by the National Probation Directorate and focused on the following objectives: helping female offenders understand anti-social thoughts and criminal motives, reevaluate consequences of criminal behavior, and develop the skill sets to find alternative, pro-social behavior. These objectives were obtained through the utilization of all female workgroups focusing on abuse and victimization, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and emotive behavioral therapy. They focused on offenders' relationships, roles, duties, self-esteem and problem solving skills. Evaluation of this program found that the all female groups worked together as a social support network, the large majority of the program participants and tutors felt the program had a positive impact on them, and offenders identified improvements in their relationships, decision-making capabilities, social interaction, and sense of empowerment.

Correctional facilities in Canada have also implemented gender responsive programs to address female criminality. These programs were implemented in all Canadian incarceration facilities that house females. Program components include Women Offender Substance Abuse Programming (WOSAP), educational and employability programs, programs for survivors of abuse and trauma, mother-children programs, parenting programs, and a social integration program for women. These community based programs aim to address female criminality in its totality, covering each aspect of the women's lives.

Gender responsive programming within correctional facilities can assist women in successful reentry to their communities. However, the long term success of women depends on the transformation of conditions that contribute to criminality, including neighborhood development, public policy reform, and social change.

Policy Recommendations and Solutions

Only with the implementation of gender responsive programming will the female offender population stop increasing.

It is not enough to apply or adapt programs designed for incarcerated males to incarcerated females. It is crucial that programs are built and designed around the central needs, life trajectories, and victimization histories of women.

Despite repeated warnings, government and policy makers have chosen to provide little to no funding or support for gender responsive programs. While progress has been made, few states have researched, studied, or implemented gender responsive programs for this rapidly increasing correctional population. Those that have were unable to sustain the programs due to lack of funding support.

The following recommendations are suggested:

- **Examine and implement alternatives to incarceration.** Female offenders do not pose the same risk or danger as male offenders. Female incarceration facilities are rapidly becoming overcrowded with nonviolent offenders. Halfway houses, pre-release centers, day supervision, work-release programs, and community corrections could provide alternatives for female offenders. Other alternatives may include electronic monitoring, substance abuse treatment programs, day reporting, or work furloughs. Funding must be redirected from incarceration facilities and placed into alternatives to incarceration for a population that poses less danger to society. Alternative sanctioning that focuses on gender responsive programming and gender responsive needs will provide the opportunity to offer services and treatments for at-risk females outside of the incarceration facilities. Statutory and policy changes should reflect an emphasis on alternatives to incarceration through the decreased utilization or removal of mandatory sentencing for nonviolent offenses.
- **Dedicate at least seven percent of government research funding to researching female offenders' histories, social and cultural factors contributing to criminality, and pathways to crime.** Current literature clearly illustrates that female offenders have different criminological pathways. Although females are seven percent of the corrections population, the population is rising at a faster rate than males. Government funding and support must be available to continue identifying females' risk predictors, gender responsive issues and history, and the intersection of race, gender, and crime. Identification of these risk predictors will provide critical information about this rapidly increasing correctional population and suggest appropriate avenues for treatment.
- **Create a National Coalition or Task Force with the sole purpose of designing a successful, sustainable gender responsive program model.** This National Coalition or Task Force should be made up of criminal justice officials, government officials, academics and community advocates. Members of this group must identify risk predictors specific to females, research current gender responsive programs, compile recommendations for a successful program model and complete a comprehensive examination of current literature. Gender responsive programming is a new avenue for the field of criminal justice (in the United States) and the Coalition or Task Force must consult with countries that have already implemented gender responsive programming for increased sustainability of the new model. The model should address classification and assessment instruments, programs and treatment within incarceration facilities, and community based treatment models for post release.
- **Establish a federal government position to monitor correctional facilities to investigate, evaluate, and implement appropriate gender responsive programs.** Government support is crucial for the success of gender responsive programming. The government must designate a position for an individual that specializes in investigating current gender responsive models in female facilities, evaluates the execution and effectiveness of existing programs and treatment, and implements components of the successful programs and models. The individual must travel to female facilities within

the United States in order to maintain consistency, support for these new programs, and for evaluation purposes.

- **Fund the utilization of gender responsive assessment and treatment within incarceration facilities, community corrections and post release.** Gender responsive assessment and treatment is promising. Programs explicitly designed for females evidence successful results, yet when criminal justice administration attempts to implement these programs, funding is unavailable. The government must provide more than just verbal support. Funding for gender responsive classification, assessment, and treatment is critical. Commitment and funding must accurately reflect the need for programming while the offender is incarcerated as well as post release. Funding should sustain numerous community partnerships with substance abuse treatment facilities, victimization and trauma services, psychological counseling, and employment/education services in order to make additional services available to women in community corrections.
- **Create and sustain educational programs to increase the awareness of government officials, employees of the criminal justice system, and the general public.** The National Coalition/Task Force and the government specialist designated to concentrate on female offenders must educate society in order to make these efforts successful. Educational programs focusing on gender specific risk predictors, the importance of gender responsive programs and models, and the successes and failures of these programs must be offered. These educational programs should be offered in conference, seminar, or workshop format and will serve numerous purposes. They will educate government officials on the importance of funding and supporting gender responsive programming, provide criminal justice employees a new and more appropriate venue for managing female offenders, offer society a better understanding of female risk predictors (for prevention) and treatment (community support for post release) and will incite a collective will to support gender responsive programming. Dissemination of this information and societal support for these offenders is critical for the success and sustainability of gender responsive programming.

Key Resources

Bloom, B. E. 2003. *Gendered Justice: Addressing Female Offenders*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.

Bloom, B.E., B. Owen, and S. Covington. 2003. *Gender responsive Strategies: Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections.

Chesney-Lind, M. and L. Pasko. 2004. *The Female Offender: Girls, Women, and Crime*. 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Ferraro, K. J. 2007. *Neither Angels nor Demons: Women, Crime, and Victimization*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

- Immarigeon, R. 2006. *Women and Girls in the Criminal Justice System: Policy Issues and Practice Strategies*. Kingston, NJ: Civic Research Institute.
- Lovbakke, J. and A. Homes. 2004. "Focus on Female Offenders: The Real Women Programme- Probation Service Pilot." London: Great Britain Home Office, Research, Development and Statistics Directorate.
- Morash, M., T.S. Bynum, and B.A. Koons. 1998. "Women Offenders: Programming Needs and Promising Approaches." Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice.
- Richie, B. 2001. "Challenges Incarcerated Women Face as They Return to Their Communities: Findings From Life History Interviews." *Crime and Delinquency* 47(3):368-89.
- Schram, P.J. and B. Koons-Witt. 2004. *Gendered (In)Justice: Theory and Practice in Feminist Criminology*. Long Grove, Ill: Waveland Press.
- Sharp, S.F. 2003. *The Incarcerated Woman: Rehabilitative Programming in Women's Prisons*. Boston: Pearson, Prentice Hall.

About the Author

Alana Van Gundy-Yoder is the Criminal Justice Program Coordinator on Miami University's Regional Campuses. She holds a Masters in Criminal Justice and a Doctorate in Sociology from the University of Cincinnati. She teaches in the fields of criminal justice, criminology, sociology, and psychology. Her scholarly interests include life-course trajectories of female offenders, testing criminological theory, and gender responsive programming.