

New Classification Instruments For Female Offenders

By Patricia Van Voorhis, Emily Salisbury, Emily Wright and Ashley Bauman

The National Institute of Corrections and the University of Cincinnati are now completing work on a joint project with four jurisdictions to develop and validate new risk/needs assessments specifically for female offenders. The work builds from two perspectives on offender rehabilitation: 1) research by Canadian scholars Donald Andrews, Paul Gendreau, James Bonta and others, which stresses the importance of treating dynamic risk factors¹ and 2) work by feminist criminologists — for example, Kathleen Daly, Meda Chesney-Lind, Barbara Bloom, Barbara Owen and Stephanie Covington² — stressing the importance of women’s unique “pathways to crime.” Both perspectives are relevant to the importance of programming for dynamic risk factors. However, the pathways perspective asserts that women’s unique needs are not adequately tapped by the current generation of risk/needs assessments. These would include matters such as trauma and abuse, mental health (especially depression), parental stress, safe housing, self-esteem, self-efficacy, relationship issues, poverty, and family support vs. conflict. In funding climates where treatment decisions accord strong priority to the treatment of risk factors for troubled prison adjustment and/or recidivism, it becomes important to learn whether the emerging gender-responsive factors are highly prevalent problems for women or are highly prevalent and highly relevant to future offending.

Development of two types of gender-responsive tools began in 1999 with a pilot study in the Colorado Department of Corrections and later continued with three larger projects in Minnesota, Missouri and Maui, Hawaii. Two types of assessments have been

developed. The first, presently called “the trailer,” is designed to supplement existing risk/needs assessments such as the Level of Service Inventory³ and the Northpointe Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS).⁴ The second is an assessment that can be used on its own. Both instruments were developed following extensive literature searches and focus groups with correctional administrators, treatment practitioners, line staff and female offenders. The full instrument, and many of the questions now asked on the trailer, were developed by members of a women’s task force in the Missouri Department of Corrections in collaboration with researchers at the University of Cincinnati.

The assessments were designed with several features in mind. First, development teams and focus groups recommended models that would facilitate seamless assessment. In other words, it was hoped that the assessments would be valid and applicable across different correctional settings (e.g., probation, institutions and parole). Second, the instruments were designed to facilitate the work of gender-responsive programming. Third, the items would be behavioral in nature, thereby requiring few subjective judgments on the part of the practitioners or respondents. For example, items on an abuse scale do not ask whether offenders were abused, but rather whether they were subjected to slapping, humiliation, threats and other abusive experiences. Finally, even issues that are common to many current needs assessments (e.g., housing or accommodations, mental illness, financial circumstances, family support, etc.) are contextualized in gender-responsive terms. Thus, housing is not

limited to issues pertinent to homelessness and anti-social influences, but also extends to issues of safety and violence within the home. Mental illness taps issues pertinent to depression and anxiety, and a family domain is expanded to include issues of emotional and financial support, parental stress and conflict. Some items speak to family of origin issues, others to intimate relationships. Attitudes or cognitive issues include self-efficacy as well as anti-social thinking. Finally, a number of items speak to strengths — self-efficacy, self-esteem, support from others and educational achievements.

Including the pilot site, the trailers were tested in three probation sites, three prison sites and two prerelease sites. The full risk/needs assessment was tested in an institutional, prerelease and probation site. Sample sizes were as follows: Colorado institutional (N=154); Missouri institutional (N=272); Minnesota institutional (N=198); Colorado parole (N=134); Missouri parole (N=378); Maui probation (N=158); Missouri Probation (N=310); and Minnesota probation (N=233).

Analysis of one year follow-up data produced promising results. Reports and final instruments are currently being prepared at the University of Cincinnati. A full accounting of the results is beyond the scope of this review; however, some general observations are in order:

- Many of the gender-responsive factors were predictive of offense-related outcomes for women. In institutional settings these included child abuse, self-efficacy, loss of personal power in relationships, relationship support, family support, family

conflict, depression and other symptoms of mental illness. In community settings, many of the same factors were related to future offending (e.g., self-efficacy, depression and other forms of mental illness). Other factors emerge in community settings that were not as noticeable in the institutional settings, such as parental stress, safe housing and victimization as an adult.

- Traditional predictors of criminal behavior (similar to those typically seen with men) were also found to be predictive of both prison misconducts and recidivism. Criminal attitudes, however, were not as highly associated with outcome measures as one would expect on the basis of research with men. However, substance abuse, anger, anti-social criminal peers and criminal history were observed to be predictive in most settings, and educational, employment and financial indices were especially important risk factors in the probation settings. The most important risk factors among those typically seen on the current generation of dynamic risk/needs assessments include substance abuse, education and employment. With the exception of one sample, the LSI-R was also valid among female offenders.

- The stand-alone risk instrument was predictive of serious misconducts (in the Missouri institutional sample) and recidivism (in the Missouri probation sample). Results for the full instruments were well within the range of predictive validity results seen for the major dynamic risk/needs instruments.

Tests of the two instruments in post-release settings were not as successful as the tests for the probation and institutional sites. The likely reason for these disappointing findings is that the dynamic items that were assessed while offenders were incarcerated changed upon their release. Results may have been better if the assessments were administered during the first month on parole.

In summary, the new instruments support use of the gender-responsive factors in risk assessment technology and correctional treatment. With some exceptions, traditional risk factors were predictive but so were the more recent gender-responsive ones. The next steps involve implementing the instruments on a wider scale in state and local jurisdictions, developing case management and training protocols, and conducting revalidation studies.

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