

**Classification of Women Offenders:
Gender-Responsive Approaches to
Risk/Needs Assessment**

Patricia Van Voorhis

**Center for Criminal Justice Research
University of Cincinnati**

Risk/needs assessment and the treatment of risk factors are fundamental tasks for public health, community mental health, and corrections. Corrections, in particular, has a standard practice of assessing offenders according to their risk of re-offending and matching the results to appropriate supervision or custody levels. Risk and needs assessments also affect decisions regarding programming and therapy, because they direct case managers to give special emphasis to those offender problems associated with future offending.

Notwithstanding their everyday use in corrections, most risk assessments were developed for men and applied to women without regard for their validity or appropriateness (Chesney Lind, 1997). For example, a recent survey of state correctional classification directors found that only 14 states had validated their institutional classification systems on women offenders (VanVoorhis & Presser, 2001). The directors further believed that the invalid systems were creating problems of over-classification, where women were being held at more secure prisons than warranted on the basis of their behavior. Additionally, the directors indicated that the current generation of classification systems ignored unique needs of women offenders—those pertaining to health, relationships, children, self-esteem and trauma. Focus groups with women offenders confirmed these concerns, and a limited number of empirical studies of women offenders offered similar observations (see Hardyman & Van Voorhis, 2004; Van Voorhis, Pealer, Spiropoulis, & Sutherland, 2001).

In response, a collaborative effort representing partnerships between the several state and local correctional agencies, the National Institute of Corrections (NIC), and the University of Cincinnati is working to construct and validate gender-responsive risk and needs assessments for women offenders. The assessments would support both community and institutional functions in areas pertinent to supervision, support, and treatment. Four studies aim to accomplish the following goals:

- To work collaboratively with the correctional agency to select or develop a risk/needs assessment for women offenders which would serve their programming needs and be appropriate to probation, prison, and parole settings.

- To develop gender-responsive measures of women's needs, eg., relationships (co-dependency), self-efficacy, self-esteem, parenting, child abuse, adult victimization, social support, mental health, etc.
- To test the validity of existing and newly developed classification models for women offenders.
- To report aggregate data to research sites on a regular basis. The reports will profile research participants according to the prevalence of criminogenic needs/dynamic risk factors. In other words, these data would inform new program and community development initiatives even before all of the validation results are available.
- To suggest policies and case management and implementation plans which follow from the research findings.
- To explore, with classification and mental health experts, options for screening women offenders at pretrial into appropriate mental health, substance abuse, medical, housing, and other supportive options.

The project was designed to support a number of emerging state and federal policy initiatives. In recent years, the National Institute of Corrections supported several communities and correctional departments in their efforts to improve programming for women offenders. Many of these initiatives received additional support through Federal Re-entry grants to improve services for newly released prison inmates. Needs and risk assessments were viewed as important screening tools for triaging offenders into such programs.

The project described in this article also builds from two earlier NIC cooperative agreements addressing the classification of women offenders to institutional settings (see Hardyman & Van Voorhis, 2004). In 1999, the Prisons Division of the National Institute of Corrections engaged in two cooperative agreements¹ to develop improved strategies for classifying incarcerated women offenders. One of the studies, research with the Colorado Department of Corrections (Van Voorhis et al., 2001), examined the impact of gender responsive measures of parenting, self-esteem, self-efficacy, relationships, and abuse. The research found that child abuse and relationships, in addition to measures pertaining to mental health, substance abuse, and employment, were stronger predictors of prison adjustment problems than more traditional custody classification measures (e.g, details of current and prior offenses, age, time to serve).

¹ These cooperative agreements were administered by Dr. Patricia Van Voorhis, at the Center for Criminal Justice Research at the University of Cincinnati, and Dr. Patricia Hardyman at the Institute on Crime, Justice and Corrections at George Washington University.

The current NIC projects are examining whether the Colorado findings hold true in community correctional settings and can be replicated in other prison settings. If needs, particularly gender-responsive needs, are more important precursors to future offending than traditional static predictors, it makes sense to develop strong programmatic strategies for addressing these needs.

Background

In most research, a body of earlier writings and empirical studies can be consulted for guidance. At the outset of the NIC research on the classification of women offenders, however, the prerequisite “previous literature” was nearly non-existent. An overview of a scant body of literature on women and classification did, however, reveal several important concerns. First, and foremost, it was clear that both institutional and community correctional classification systems had been developed without taking women into consideration (Burke & Adams, 1991; Morash, Bynum, & Koons, 1998; Van Voorhis, 2001; Van Voorhis & Presser, 2001). Many states appeared to be using systems that had not been validated on women offenders. Although it has long been considered unethical to apply *any* assessment to a population other than the one used for its construction and validation (AACP, 2000; APA, 1992), failure to validate correctional assessments to specific populations was a common observation (Van Voorhis & Brown, 1996). Of course, in all likelihood, such invalid classifications also resulted in inappropriate placements.

A related issue concerned whether custody and risk-based models meant the same for men as for women. Not all correctional officials agreed that women offenders were as dangerous as men (Burke & Adams, 1991; Morash et al., 1998). Empirical support for this perception was seen in (a) some (though not all) state validation studies of security-based classification systems for women (e.g., Alexander & Humphrey, 1988; Hardyman, 1999), (b) several studies conducted prior to the 1980s and reviewed by Bowker (1981), and (c) comparisons between men and women at similar community risk categories (Baird, 1991; Hoffman, 1982). Most studies found that at similar levels of risk or custody, women had a lower incidence of new offenses or serious prison misconducts than men.

Another issue questioned the relevance of commonly used classification variables, such as static criminal history variables and stability factors (e.g., age, education, and employment) (Burke & Adams, 1991). Early research identified several more relevant risk factors for women, including (a) marital status and suicide attempts (Forcier, 1995); (b) family structure of the childhood home (Balthazar & Cook, 1984; Kruttschnitt & Krmpotich, 1990); (c) childhood

abuse, depression and substance abuse (McClellan, Farabee, & Crouch, 1997; Van Voorhis et al., 2001); (d) single parenting and reliance upon public assistance (Bonta, Pang, Wallace-Capretta, 1995); and (e) dysfunctional relationships (Covington, 1998; Van Voorhis et al., 2001). Moreover, recent interest in gender-specific programming has encouraged attention to (a) victimization; (b) childcare; (c) self-esteem; (d) poverty; and (e) women's unique health, substance abuse, and mental health issues (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003).

However, not all researchers agreed that women needed to be assessed according to these different needs. In a meta-analysis of delinquency causation studies, for example, Simourd and Andrews reported that the most important criminogenic needs were the same for men and women (Simourd & Andrews, 1994). Lowenkamp and Latessa (2002) suggested that only *some* criminogenic needs were the same for men and women and that the respective needs had different roles and predictive power for men and women. However, neither study considered gender-specific needs, so we could not determine whether adding such factors would change their conclusions in important ways.

Even so, current needs assessments do not reflect the most recent research on women's criminality. Women appear to have different pathways to substance abuse than men (Covington, 1998; Wanberg & Milkman, 1998). Their offenses are more likely to involve relationship issues and are less likely than men's to involve anti-social rationalizations (Covington, 1998; Erez, 1988). Women offenders are more likely than men to be diagnosed with mental illness. Therefore, advocates of gender-responsive programming have recommended interventions that target physical and sexual abuse, relationships, self-esteem, gender-responsive dimensions of substance abuse, and mental health (Belknap, Holsinger, & Dunn, 1998; Bloom, Owen & Covington, 2003; Dembo, Williams, Wothke, Schmeidler, & Brown, 1992; Holsinger, 1999; Morash et al., 1998). Gender-responsive programming, of course, would require the inclusion of gender-specific needs in the current generation of needs assessment instruments.

The possibility that some of the gender-specific needs may also predict prison misconducts or new offenses complicates matters. Incorporating needs such as abuse, depression, and self-esteem into risk assessments or custody determinations presents a new set of problems. Even though such factors may be highly predictive, the prospect of housing women in more austere environments on the bases of their problems, rather than their behavior, raises disturbing ethical concerns. More defensible alternatives suggest policies such as enhanced opportunities for treatment and custody levels, which better fit women's reduced likelihood of committing dangerous prison infractions and new offenses. In this context, careful policy discussions

concerning how the new risk/needs are to be used in treating and supervising women offenders are of utmost importance.

The first NIC Cooperative Agreement formed to address these considerations worked with seven states to improve custody and needs assessments for incarcerated women offenders. The three-year project resulted in a monograph titled “Developing Gender-Specific Classification Systems for Women Offenders (Hardyman & Van Voorhis, 2004). This document offers recommendations toward: a) validating classifications and assessments for incarcerated women; b) preventing the common problems of over-classifying women;² c) setting appropriate scale cutpoints; and d) improving needs assessments in ways that identify needs most relevant to women offenders.

Gender-Responsive Approaches to Risk/Needs Assessment: The Current NIC Study

The current project focuses primarily on the notion of gender-responsive needs. The core issue is where these needs (e.g., child abuse, adult victimization, mental health, substance abuse, parenting, relationships, self-efficacy, and self-esteem) fit with respect to program planning and risk reduction. Collateral research questions concern: a) whether the gender-responsive needs should supplement existing dynamic risk assessment instruments (i.e. improve their predictive validity) or should separate dynamic risk assessment models be developed for women; b) the feasibility of developing seamless classification models to work across correctional settings (jails, prisons, probation, parole, community corrections); and c) a determination of the best way to measure each of these needs (e.g., checklist, interview, record data).

Project sites were selected according to the following criteria (a) commitment to the development of gender-responsive programming; (b) capacity for engaging as a working partner with NIC and the University of Cincinnati throughout the project; (c) capacity for collecting or downloading data for research purposes, and (d) prospects for implementing gender-responsive assessments at the conclusion of the research phases of the project.

The sites are active partners in this research. Each site had already formed gender-responsive task forces and these teams worked with University of Cincinnati research staff to design the research procedures. In one site, the Missouri Department of Corrections, the task force designed a public domain, gender-responsive, assessment instrument, which is currently being validated. Personnel at each of the sites are also coordinating the data collection activities.

² Over-classification refers to a common situation where women offenders are held at higher custody levels than warranted on the basis of their behavior. It is problem common to states which have not conducted validation studies specific to women offenders.

To date, three research sites have designed assessment procedures and have begun to collect data. A fourth site is currently being selected.

MAUI C.A.R.E. Project: Research at this site supports a planning team formed to improve services to women who become known to the criminal justice system. The policy group represents a partnership between court, correctional, mental health, health, social services, and substance abuse agencies serving Maui. Among samples of probationers and parolees, the study examines the value of adding a gender-responsive “trailer” to the Level of Service Inventory (Andrews & Bonta, 1995) a risk/needs instrument mandated for use with probationers and parolees in Hawaii. The “trailer” refers to a questionnaire, completed by women offenders, which assesses self-efficacy, self-esteem, parenting, relationships, and abuse. The study collects additional profile information pertaining to children, marital status, family support, transportation, housing, education, public assistance, mental health, and finances. This third instrument was designed by the Policy Team.

Missouri Department of Corrections: UC and NIC staff worked with the Missouri Women’s Issues Committee to design a public domain, dynamic, risk/needs instrument for use with women assigned to probation, incarceration, and prerelease. The study tests the viability of that instrument as well as the trailer. Because the public domain instrument taps many of the same needs through an interview format as the trailer taps through a paper and pencil format, this study also affords an opportunity to compare the two formats in order to determine the optimal manner of assessing gender responsive needs (interview or survey). When completed, the women’s risk/needs assessment will serve as a seamless assessment for women across correctional placements.

Minnesota: The “trailer” Plans are underway to begin testing the trailer in three community correctional sites, with probationers, and in one institutional settings. The trailer (assesses self-efficacy, self-esteem, parenting, relationships, and abuse) will be tested as a supplement to the LSI-R. This combination will be tested in institutional, pre-release, and probation settings, and will support the work of a state-level women’s task force.

The larger project is also beginning to explore screening tools for use in pretrial settings at both pre-booking and post-booking time periods. A number of experts in the area of correctional classification and mental health and substance abuse assessment will be coming together to discuss and perhaps construct options for screening women at pretrial. In this case, the goal is not to cover all major risk areas, but rather to identify services that are urgently needed. The screening information in this case would support such decisions as pretrial release, diversion, and referral to urgently needed community services and tap factors pertinent to child care, housing, mental health, substance abuse, personal safety, and employment.

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