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publication in Australian Social Work)**

**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SUPPORT AND REHABILITATION  
SERVICES FOR WOMEN OFFENDERS**

**ABSTRACT**

There is a large body of research which suggests that support, rehabilitation and supervision programs can help offenders to reduce recidivism. The effectiveness of services is, however, dependent on the extent to which the workers who deliver them comply with ‘what works’ principles and practices. Most of this research has been conducted with men and this study examines the extent to which these principles and practices apply to women. The study focuses on services offered to a group of women in prison in Victoria and following their release to the community. It examines the relationship between the women’s views about the services, recidivism and characteristics of services. The results are generally consistent with earlier research. They favour services which are delivered by workers who are reliable, holistic, collaborative, understand the women’s perspective and focus on strengths. They do not support services which challenge the women, focus on their offences or things they do badly.

## **BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

There is an increasingly persuasive body of research which suggests that support, rehabilitation and supervision programs can be effective in reducing recidivism rates of people released from prison (e.g., Andrews and Bonta, 2008). Most of this research, however, has focused on men, who comprise the majority of prisoners. Despite rates of female imprisonment having increased throughout the western world (McIvor, 2010) there has been little attention given to whether or not principles that underpin effective services for men also apply to interventions with women.

Among the growing literature on ‘what works’ in reducing recidivism among offenders, research reviewed by Trotter (2006) suggests that successful interventions: are accessible at times when offenders need them; clear about aims and worker’s roles; model and reinforce pro-social values and actions and make appropriate use of challenging or confrontation; work with client definitions of problems; address problems which are directly related to the person’s offending (e.g. drugs, employment, anger); focus on skill development (including social skills) or practical issues rather than feelings or insight; take a holistic approach to client issues rather than a focus on specific problems or symptoms; and present an optimistic view to offenders of their potential for change. These principles are broadly consistent with the desistance paradigm (McNeill, 2006; Maruna & LeBel, 2010) and with Ward’s ‘good lives’ model (Ward, 2010) both of which involve a focus on client strengths and promoting the natural process of maturation away from offending.

The ‘risk-needs-responsivity’ (RNR) model of intervention with offenders developed by Bonta and Andrews (2010) through a series of meta-analyses, identifies a number of characteristics of effective interventions with offenders and again they are broadly consistent with the principles outlined above. They also point to the importance of a positive worker/client relationship or ‘therapeutic alliance’. The RNR model does, however, place particular emphasis on the value of focusing on high risk offenders and offenders’ ‘criminogenic’ needs (in other words those that relate directly to offending); and on the use of cognitive and social learning perspectives.

The appropriateness of the RNR model and associated cognitive behavioural approaches with women has, however, been challenged. By positing a link between cognitive deficits and offending, cognitive behavioural programmes have been

accused of teaching women that their problems are a result of their own deficient thinking. It is argued that they tend to hold women responsible for their own oppression and attempt to regulate their conduct by drawing attention away from the structural inequalities of their lives (Hannah-Moffat, 2001; Kendall, 2002).

Moreover, the technology of risk assessment that underpins the RNR approach has been derived from research involving samples principally of (young, white) men with the result that “the literature and subsequent practices ignore and dismiss the effect of gender and diversity, or the social and economic constraints on offenders’ lives” (Shaw and Hannah-Moffat, 2004, p.91). It has been further argued that risk assessment redefines ‘needs’ as risk factors related to recidivism, limiting the scope of interventions to those factors for which a direct link to recidivism can be found (Worrall, 2003). This contributes to an increase in the imprisonment of women because risk assessment practices result in women – who tend to have more ‘needs’ than men – being construed as ‘riskier’ than they actually are (Carlen, 2003; Hudson, 2002).

Theories of psychological development have highlighted important differences in developmental processes between women and men (Gilligan, 1982; Bloom, Owen & Covington, 2005) and these may have implications for the nature of women’s ‘criminogenic needs’ (Hedderman, 2004; Hollin & Palmer, 2006) and for the types of interventions that can best engage women in the process of change (Blanchette & Brown, 2006). Female offenders’ needs are overlapping with, but different from and more complex than, the needs of offending men. Even if certain factors appear to be *associated* with both male and female offending, how they intersect with offending may be different, reflecting gendered experiences, motivations and opportunities (Shaw & Hannah-Moffat, 2004).

Based on these arguments an array of gender specific programs have been developed in North America, Australia and the UK with slightly different foci, but united by a common emphasis upon addressing female offenders’ needs using methods that acknowledge women’s distinctive and complex ‘pathways’ into crime (Roberts, 2002; Bloom, Owen & Covington, 2005). Increasingly, innovative gender responsive programs for women are characterised by their emphasis upon providing a ‘holistic’ response to criminalised women’s problems and needs (Buell, Modley, and Van Voohis, 2011; Gelsthorpe, 2011; Hedderman, Palmer, & Hollin, 2008; Loucks,

Malloch, McIvor, & Gelsthorpe, 2006). Although it should be noted that, as Hannah-Moffat (2010) argues, there is still a tendency within these approaches to rely upon the assessment of 'needs' that are redefined as 'risks'.

The study reported on in this paper attempts to consider the extent to which the characteristics of effective interventions identified from previous research are relevant to women who receive support and rehabilitation programs and services in prison in Victoria, Australia and in the community following their release. This study addresses an issue of considerable and growing importance in Australia and beyond. The quality of support available to ex-prisoners is central to their successful re-integration in the community and the avoidance of further personal, social and economic costs associated with continued re-offending (Petersilia, 2000; Baldry, McDonnell, Maplestone, & Peeters, 2003; Carlen, 2003).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Aim**

The aim of this paper is to report on interventions and services from two perspectives: (1) What is the relationship between the characteristics of services delivered to women offenders and the women's view that their chances of re-offending after release have been reduced as a result of the service? (2) What is the relationship between the characteristics of the services delivered to women and recidivism?

### **The Services**

In this study a broad definition of 'services' is adopted. It includes parole and welfare services provided by a range of organisations (in areas such as housing, domestic violence, education and employment) aimed at addressing women's personal and social needs in addition to programs of intervention aimed at addressing women's offending or issues directly related to it (such as addictions, anger management or mental health). For the most part in this study, women accessed these services on a voluntary basis while in prison. After their release from prison, some women's engagement with services was a condition of their parole while others accessed services themselves on a voluntary basis. The study does not distinguish

between voluntary and involuntary services partly because the distinctions are not always clear and partly because the research on the ‘what works’ principles suggests that they apply to services which offenders access on a voluntary or involuntary basis (Trotter, 2006).

### **The Sample**

The study focuses on a sample of women who were in prison in Victoria, during 2003 to 2005. Women with sentences of less than three months were excluded from the sample as they had limited opportunity to access prison based services. This article reports on 58 women interviewed in prison and interviewed again in the community within three months of their release, and on whom recidivism data was also available. All of the women had used at least one service in prison and at least one service in the community following their release.

Initially 139 women were interviewed in prison, however, only 110 of those used services while in prison and only 83 of those women interviewed in prison could be contacted for a further interview in the community. The sample was further reduced because recidivism data was only available on 58 of those who had been interviewed in prison and in the community. An additional interview was also conducted with 63 women more than one year after their release, however, the results are not reported here other than self reported recidivism data (explained below). The women were recruited on a voluntary basis, consistent with ethics requirements, via a poster displayed in the cells and recreation areas of the prison. Of the 58 women in the sample, 32 had been granted parole.

The average age of the women was 32 when interviewed in prison, younger than the average female prisoner in Victoria (35 in 2005) (Department of Justice 2010) 86% percent reported having been born in Australia, more than the state average (76%), 2% in Vietnam (state average 4.5%) and 3% percent in New Zealand (state average 2.5%). The most common offences for which they were imprisoned were: property offences (e.g theft, deception) 43% (state average 43%) (Department of Justice 2010), robbery 12% (state average 6%), drug offences 12% (state average 15%), motor vehicle offences 8% (state average 1%) and offences against the person (murder assault) 4% (state average 25%) . The average minimum length of sentence was 13 months (state average 15.9 months). Thirty percent of the women were either

married or had been living in a defacto relationship prior to their admission to prison (33% state average). None were aboriginal although the state average was 8%.

Sixty-seven percent reported having children, most commonly living with their father or maternal grandparents. Sixty-six percent of the women reported having had contact with welfare agencies prior to their imprisonment, with the number of agencies previously contacted varying from one to 14. The women had a range of problems which they felt might impact on their ability to avoid further offending following their release (e.g. drug use 25%; friends 20%; housing 6%). None of the women specifically referred to mental health issues.

### **The Prisons**

The women were released either from the Women's Correctional Centre at Deer Park, on the outskirts of Melbourne, or from Tarrengower Women's Prison, situated 136 kilometres from Melbourne.

### **The Interview Schedule**

A structured interview schedule was developed based on the effective practice principles referred to in the introduction. It included 63 questions scaled from 1 to 5 relating to key dimensions of effective practice identified in the literature including for example: role clarification; worker/client relationship; strengths focus; problem solving. The aim of the interviews was to find out what services the women accessed, the characteristics of those services and whether the women believed that they had contributed to a reduced likelihood of re-offending. The women were also asked about the extent to which the services helped them with their problems, however, the responses were closely correlated with the responses to the question about the extent to which the services contributed to their reduced offending and are therefore not reported here. The first outcome measure in the study is therefore the women's views about the extent to which the services contributed to their reduced offending. The second outcome measure is recidivism.

### **The Recidivism Measure**

Recidivism data was gathered for this study from:

(1) Police records – 42 of the 58 women in the sample gave permission to access their

police records. These were gathered at least one year after the last woman was released, with some women having been released for up to 26 months at this time.

The follow up period was therefore between 12 and 26 months.

(2) Self Report – During the second round of community based interviews conducted more than 12 months after they had been released from prison the women were asked if they had been “involved in further offending since their release”. Forty-one of the women in the sample answered this question. At least one of these recidivism measures was available for all of the women reported on in this study. A composite recidivism measure was therefore used, which identified any further offence committed since release from prison, identified either through police records or self report.

This recidivism measure, because it includes 58 women, is more amenable to statistical analysis than the other measures are individually. While it would have been preferable to have police data (and self report data) on all participants in the study, this was not possible given the ethics requirements of the study and the need for informed consent. Nevertheless, the self report and police data in the 25 cases where both were available in relation to the same women correlated strongly and significantly with each other ( $r = .490$ ;  $p < .05$ ). In only two of the 25 instances when both police records and self report were available did the women fail to disclose further offending identified in the police records. It is argued therefore that while the composite recidivism measure is not ideal it does provide a reasonably accurate measure of re-offending for the women in this study. In all, 30 of the 58 women (52 percent) showed evidence of having committed a further offence during the follow up period.

### **Ethical considerations**

The research was approved by the Monash University Ethics Committee and the Victorian Department of Justice Ethics Committee.

## RESULTS

### Services Used in Prison

The women were asked which services they used in prison. They were prompted with suggestions if they could not remember and all the services they referred to were noted. The services they used most were accommodation, substance abuse, employment and education services as shown in Table 1. It should be noted that educational services included courses such as drug counselling, in addition to formal education programs. The services least used (often because of limited availability) were anger and stress management, with less than 10 percent of the women accessing these services.

Table 1

#### *Frequency of contact with prison-based services*

The frequency with which the women used services varied considerably. Women who used educational or religious services (usually provided by chaplains or volunteers) saw them on average about weekly, whereas accommodation, and employment services were used less frequently. Women with longer sentences made more use of services, however, the extent to which the different services were used by the women with longer or shorter sentences was similar. Table 2 shows the average number of contacts which the women had with each service.

Table 2

#### *Relationship between services offered in prison and women's views about further offending.*

The 58 women each of whom had used at least one service in the prison were asked to rate the services, on a five point scale, along the 63 dimensions of effective practice and to rate on the five point scale their response to the statement "my chances



of re-offending after release have been reduced as a result of this service”. The five point scale was categorised as 1.Untrue, 2.Mostly Untrue, 3.Neither True or Untrue, 4.Mostly True and 5.True.

Sixty of the 63 items were significantly related (within the .05 level of significance) to the women’s belief that ‘my chances of re-offending after release have been reduced as a result of this service’. The ten factors most strongly correlated are summarised in Table 3. The correlations are shown in brackets in order from the strongest.

Table 3

It can be seen from Table 3 that the program characteristics which correlated most strongly with the women’s view that the service had reduced their chances of re-offending included that the services were: holistic, understanding and collaborative; the worker was reliable; the worker believed in the women’s capacity for change; the worker provided practical assistance; the women did practical things to address problems; and that they liked the worker.

While the items with the strongest association with the worker practices are outlined in Table 3, other items also showed strong correlations, for example items relating to a pro-social and strengths focus (‘the worker encouraged me when I said non-criminal things’); and items relating to the worker being clear about their role (e.g. ‘the purpose of the service was clear’).

Certain features of the service were *not* related to the women’s view that their chances of re-offending after release had been reduced as a result of using the service. These include having their behaviours challenged by workers, detailed discussions about offences and the worker commenting on the things the client does badly.

#### *Relationship Between Services Offered in Prison and the Recidivism Measure*

The relationships between the women’s ratings of the characteristics of the services received in prison and the recidivism measure were similar to the relationships with the women’s view that their chances of re-offending were reduced. Each of the ten items most strongly correlated with the women’s rating about what

helps them to reduce offending (Table 3) was also correlated with the recidivism measure when a comparison of means was undertaken in SPSS. The only exception to this was: ‘Worker and I worked together to decide how we would address my problems’ which was slightly but not significantly related to higher offending.

The correlations between the women’s ratings of the features of the service provided in prison with the recidivism measure were for the most part, however, not statistically significant. In only three instances was the correlation significant – two with relationship factors (‘my worker had a sense of humour’, ‘my worker is a friend’) and one relating to practical assistance (my worker did practical things for me’). Each of these variables was within the conventional level of significance of .10 using a one tailed test (acceptable when the direction of the result is predicted and the results are part of a consistent pattern (Weinbach and Grinnell, 1995)).

### **Services Following Release**

As discussed earlier the 58 women interviewed in prison were also interviewed in the community within three months of their release. All had had some contact with welfare agencies since their release with more than half seeing three or more agencies. The agencies the women were most likely to access were community corrections, where many were required to attend for supervision, housing, material assistance in the form of money or food vouchers, alcohol or drug counselling, personal support, employment, and gamblers anonymous. The women most commonly reported that they visited or were visited by a worker from the agency about once per week (49%) with others seeing a worker from the agency less frequently.

When the women were interviewed in the community they provided similar responses to those they offered in prison with respect to the extent to which they believed that aspects of the services they accessed had helped to reduce their chances of re-offending (Table 4).

#### Table 4

The themes are similar to those which emerged from the prison based interviews. The women valued workers who: were understanding; provided practical

assistance; were reliable; were collaborative; were clear about their authority; and with whom they had a good relationship. While the strongest associations are outlined in Table 4 other themes were also supported by the data - For example holistic services, making maximum use of the service and clarity of the role of the service.

Similar to the responses of the women while in prison there was not a significant relationship between the women's views that services had helped them not to re-offend and whether the worker talked a lot about their offences, challenged the client or talked about the things the women did badly.

#### *Service Characteristics Identified by the Women and Recidivism*

There were also positive correlations between the recidivism measure (police records and self report as described in the methodology section) and the characteristics that were attributed to the services by the women. Table 5 outlines the characteristics significantly associated (at the .10 level) with the recidivism measure.

Table 5

Again the themes are repeated. Those women who showed no evidence of re-offence reported more often and at statistically significant levels (at the .10 level) that they received services which were: clear about purpose; understanding of their problems; available for maximum use; and holistic. Again there was no support for commenting on the things the women do badly, challenging them or focusing on discussions about offences.

#### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

There is clearly a relationship between the various skills used by the workers as defined by the women and the client outcomes. However there a number of criticisms which could be made of this study.

The sample is not a representative sample. The women were younger than the state average, more likely to have been born in Australia, more likely to have shorter

prison sentences, more likely to have committed robberies or car related offences, (rather than offences against the person), and less likely to be Aboriginal. It could be that a more representative sample would have provided different ratings for the skills of the workers and therefore different relationships with the outcome measures. For example young women or high risk women might rate the skills lower and have poorer outcomes. There was however no evidence of this.

There were few significant relationships between the ages of the women, where the women were born, the length of their sentence or the offences they had committed and their ratings on the 63 items of effective practice. The only statistically significant relationships in the prison based interviews were between the length of the sentence for which the women were imprisoned and the women's belief that their worker believed they could change (longer sentences were related to this belief) and in the community based interviews younger women were more likely to say that the worker focused on their problems as they described them.

There was also no evidence that the women who could be classified high risk were more prone to score the items differently to those who were low risk, suggesting that the results cannot be explained by the possibility that lower risk women rated the services higher. The number of previous sentences of imprisonment taken from police records (of the 42 women in the sample who agreed to allow access their records) is a good predictor of the level of risk of further offending (Department of Justice Victoria, 2007). There were, however, only two significant relationships between the number of previous sentences of imprisonment and the way in which the women scored the 63 items when in prison, and no significant differences for the community based interviews. Higher risk women in prison were significantly less likely to report that the worker was their friend or that their worker talked a lot about offences. There were no other differences.

Another limitation of the study relates to the recidivism measure. It has been argued, however, that the recidivism measure is a meaningful one. This is further confirmed by the consistency of the findings between the women's views and the recidivism outcomes. Nevertheless, as discussed earlier, it would have been preferable to have had police records and/or self reports on all of the women who participated in the study.

A further potential criticism is that the research does not distinguish between types of services even though the services are as disparate as parole supervision, psychology and chaplaincy. However, it is becoming increasingly clear from the many meta-analyses that have been undertaken (Andrews & Bonta, 2008 provide a summary) that it is the *individual characteristics* of services rather than the *type* of service which is associated with increased effectiveness. This study therefore aimed to examine which *features* of services were valued by women and appeared to be associated with reductions in recidivism. These features of the service related primarily to the skills or style of the workers (e.g. understanding) and the individual nature of their intervention (e.g. provision of practical assistance).

A further limitation is that only those women with sentences of 3 months or more were selected for the study and the study included only 25 percent of the 237 women with sentences of three months or more who were released from prison in the period of the project. The sample only represents a portion therefore of the women released in Victoria during the period of the study and does not include women serving very short sentences. The need to include women who had time to access services (over three months in prison), the voluntary nature of the sample and the difficulty of finding the women in the community contributed to this (see also Brown and Ross, 2010a for a similar discussion of self-selection among ex-prisoner samples). These are largely inevitable shortcomings of research with prisoners, nevertheless it is argued that the research is still valuable.

Finally, the study would have been more persuasive if it did not rely solely on the women's views about the nature of the services offered. It would have been stronger if workers' views were gathered, if documentation regarding services were examined or if interventions could be observed, however, this was not feasible, given the limitations of time and funding.

## **DISCUSSION**

The existing literature points to certain principles as being generally associated with positive outcomes in services for offenders, however, these principles have been developed for the most part with male populations or with mixed populations, the majority of whom are male. The aim of this study was to consider whether and in

what ways the same principles of effective practice applied to a group of women offenders released from prisons in Victoria, Australia.

The worker or service characteristics which were most strongly related to reduced offending in the view of the women and from the analysis of the recidivism measure include: a positive client worker relationship, including the worker understanding the women's perspective; collaborating with the women and having an optimistic view that the women can change; a holistic approach, or the worker focusing on all of the issues of concern to the women; the reliability of the worker; and the worker giving practical assistance. The results also favour services which are clear about purpose and role, and those that the women can make maximum use of. These findings are broadly consistent with the literature regarding what 'works' in offender programs and offender supervision (Trotter, 2006) and support a developing emphasis on strengths based approaches, including the importance of a positive worker/client relationship or 'therapeutic alliance'.

The factors not associated with good outcomes, on the other hand, were the worker talking a lot about their offences, talking about the things they do badly and challenging the women. It is clear from the wider literature that punitive approaches do not work (Andrews & Bonta, 2008) and it appears that a focus on what offenders do badly is counter-productive. There is also evidence from recent research on the supervision of women in the UK that social workers and their female clients often find a direct focus on offending behaviour to be unnecessary and unhelpful (Malloch and McIvor, 2011).

An area where the results of this study vary from previous research is in relation to challenging clients. Most (male-centric) intervention models argue in favour of challenging 'pro-criminal' comments and actions albeit in a constructive way (e.g. Bourgeon, Bonta, Ruge, and Gutierruz, 2010; Trotter, 2006). This may be a key difference between working with men and women in the criminal justice system – that women are less responsive to having their behaviour and attitudes challenged and more responsive to explicitly strengths based approaches that recognize the structural context of women's offending and aim, among other things, to promote self-efficacy and empowerment.

Structured problem solving approaches, including goal setting and cognitive behavioural techniques have also been identified in some research as effective

interventions with offenders (Bourgeon et al., 2010; Bonta & Andrews, 2010), although these were not explored directly in the current study. While this study suggests that the quality of the worker/client relationship may be more important than the nature of the intervention, further research might nevertheless focus more directly on the use and effectiveness of cognitive behavioural and other structured methods of intervention with women - particularly given the lack of evidence that programmes of this type 'work' with women (Cann, 2006; Lart, Pantazis, Pemberton, Turner, & Almeida, 2008; Gelsthorpe, 2011).

To conclude, this study aimed to examine the extent to which principles of effective rehabilitation apply to a group of women released from prison in Victoria. The study clearly suggests that many of the principles relating to offender rehabilitation may be applicable to women. The data are consistent with findings from a growing body of qualitative research that seeks to give a voice to women in the criminal justice system to identify what they think will support their efforts to desist from crime (e.g. Hedderman, Gunby & Shelton, 2011; McIvor, Trotter, & Sheehan, 2009; Malloch & McIvor, 2011). As we have discussed, women responded to workers who were relationship and strengths-focused rather than those who focused on deficits. This has important implications for effective engagement with women and emphasises the potential of strengths-based and relationship-based approaches such as the desistance paradigm for offender supervision (e.g. McNeill, 2006; Maruna & LeBel, 2010) and other similar approaches that seek to promote 'good lives' (Ward, 2010) by focusing on things which might make offenders' lives meaningful and fostering the changes that offenders make for themselves as they mature.

Maguire and Raynor (2006) identify an increasing convergence between effective resettlement practice and the desistance literature, although their advocacy of an approach that addresses both opportunities and *thinking* may have more limited relevance to women. This is not to suggest that women who offend *never* make inappropriate choices with respect to their decisions to offend but their decision-making needs to be understood in the context of severely constrained choices. As qualitative analysis of the experiences of women leaving prison in Australia has revealed (McIvor et al., 2009; Baldry, 2010; Brown & Ross, 2010a), for many women opportunities and choices either do not exist or are extremely constrained.

Maguire and Raynor (2006) have suggested that ex-prisoners' lack of access to social justice may reflect both a lack of access to resources and the absence of commitment on the part of society to prisoner resettlement. However they also argue that strengths-based approaches, by focusing on the potential for offenders to contribute positively to society, perhaps offer greater hope of public acceptance and effectiveness of ex-prisoner re-integration. The recent research by Brown and Ross (2010b) is of particular interest in this regard. Not only does it illustrate the potential benefits – through personal emotional support – of mentoring for some women leaving prison, but it also highlights the capacity and willingness of members of the community to harness and expend their social capital to make a difference to formerly imprisoned women's lives.



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