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Similarities and Differences Between Male and Female Offenders

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My career in corrections began 26 years ago in a men’s community/minimum-security facility. Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to work in different facilities with all custody levels and have gained valuable knowledge and perspective along the way. On May 8, 2013, I was given the opportunity to become warden at the only women’s facility in Nebraska, the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women. My short tenure working with female offenders has given me a new perspective and additional knowledge about corrections. A big question among those who work in corrections is: Are male and female offenders different from each other, and should they be treated differently? Many of the issues/situations that I have faced while working in corrections such as tattooing, offenders refusing to take medication and selling medication to others, offenders pressuring others for candy, etc., were faced while working with both men and women.

Another similarity among both male and female offenders is the need for education. Although funding may be a concern for many departments of correction, studies have shown that female offenders who receive their GED, vocational training or post-secondary education had a significant reduction in recidivism. The higher the degree of education, the lower the recidivism. In addition, women report physical or sexual abuse in their history at a much higher rate than men. This, along with factors mentioned above, lead to a sense of low self-worth, low self-esteem and hopelessness.

Generally, men do not suffer from this lack of self-worth or self-esteem at the same rate as women. The most significant factor that has changed my perspective about female offenders is the number of female offenders who are mothers and have past work experience, but have not worked for one year or more. This offender would most likely rely on public assistance or family to help her provide for herself and her children. If public assistance was limited and her family was not willing or able to assist, it would most likely be the catalyst to the crimes causing incarceration. Male offenders who have children are generally not the primary caregivers or custodians. This is fairly consistent in our society, whether incarcerated or not. Male offenders generally have past work experience and maintained employment for the most part until incarceration.

Studies indicate that the children of female offenders (or incarcerated parents) are at risk for future incarceration, as they are often placed in foster care or raised by a grandparent. At the Nebraska Correctional Youth Facility, 44 percent of the offenders have parents who are currently incarcerated or have been incarcerated. Female offenders who have children are often the sole financial providers for their families. Many female offenders have little or no education, which generally leads to fewer opportunities for employment and lower wages.

Many women are incarcerated for crimes related to drug use, forgery or theft. Sometimes, forgery or theft occurs to support the female offender’s children and/or drug habit. Women are generally less violent than men — both for the crimes leading to their incarceration, and during their incarceration. This means they are less likely to present violent behavior during their incarceration.

With all these similarities and differences, the most noticeable and greatest concern for successful reentry is self-esteem. The inherent need for...
someone to feel love, support, independence and confidence is often felt more deeply among female offenders. Some ways to build self-esteem, hope and self-worth include: providing educational opportunities; role modeling pro-social behaviors; reinforcing positive change and supportive relationships; and redirecting negative influences and behaviors. It is important to work toward establishing the five stabilizing factors for successful reentry: managed mental health, substance abuse programming, stable housing, stable employment and supportive relationships.

How do we develop these ingredients for making better choices that can lead to success? How can we make a difference? How can we help establish the stabilizing factors? Ultimately, the offender makes the choice to change. However, as corrections professionals, we take on the responsibility to provide the tools to help impact that positive change. We do this through programs; reaching out to the community providers and volunteers; encouraging family support; and talking to the offender through tools such as motivational interviewing. Having an honest conversation with offenders about the difficulties and rewards of reentry can have a positive impact on their success. For an inmate, success may not be defined as having a lot of money, but earning enough to pay the bills and building positive relationships with family and friends who support each other.

As corrections professionals, we have an opportunity to impact the future of offenders, their children and families through innovative programs and positive interactions. While men and women share similarities, they definitely have their differences. It is important that we recognize those differences in addressing the needs of the female population.

ENDNOTES


