

NIC's Women Offender Initiative:

New Research in Action

By Maureen Buell

Often, correctional staff members express negative sentiments about working with women until they begin to gain a better understanding of how to effectively work with this population. One might hear that working in a women's facility is not "real corrections," or that working with several male offenders is easier than working with one female offender. Women bring life experiences and ways of communicating that often challenge accepted correctional practices developed for a predominantly male population. Those differences are significant enough to dissuade staff from working with female offenders and can negatively impact outcomes with this population.

Since NIC received its first request for technical assistance specific to females offenders in 1975, the field has begun to recognize that many correctional practices do not have the same applicability to women as men. Through a review of available research literature and upon hearing from seasoned practitioners with years of experience working with women involved in the justice system, it is clear that there are many areas within corrections that are unique to women; there are incidents that occur with higher frequency for women than for men and these incidents have a different impact on women than men.

At the top of the list are physical and behavioral health issues (high-risk pregnancies, lack of maternal health care and resultant issues), high rates of drug and alcohol addiction due to underlying psychological and emotional issues, histories of interpersonal violence — including sexual and physical abuse that often continues into adulthood — and responsibility

for children. These issues often affect a women's behavior both in the institution and on community supervision, and it challenges staff who are not equipped to manage those behaviors.

Correctional practices should effectively apply to all offenders. However, it is said that "same does not mean equal," and for those who have worked with female offenders that phrase is well-understood. Applying a practice to a female offender in the exact same way it is applied to a male may have different results. If those areas of difference are not better understood and reflected in correctional practices, the corrections field will continue to see women being driven deeper into the system and resources being used with reduced benefit. Working with female offenders is challenging and clearly not for everyone, but fortunately, there are research-based and gender-informed programs for women in the public domain that better target the risk and needs of this population.

Noted below are a number of initiatives that NIC offers specific to female offenders. These are designed to assist jurisdictions in reducing risk, making better use of resources, targeting treatment and supervision areas that have more relevance for women, and generally improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system.

Women's Risk and Need Assessments

In early 2002, responding to repeated requests from the field, NIC sponsored a working meeting in Washington, D.C., with the objective of developing a research agenda on assessment strategies for female

offenders. Participants included researchers and practitioners recognized for their knowledge and expertise in areas related to female offenders. Together, the participants developed an agenda that would establish research standards and the formation of multi-disciplinary teams to further explore women's involvement in the criminal justice system.

In 2004, NIC partnered with the University of Cincinnati via cooperative agreement to construct two gender-responsive risk/needs assessment with scales pertaining to gender-responsive needs presented by women, referred to as the Women's Risk and Need Assessments (WRNA). In addition to identifying strength-based items, the new tools have increased focus on identifying issues around mental health, healthy relationships, parental stress, safety and abuse, and self-efficacy. Foundational research identifies these as contributory factors to a woman's risk of criminal behaviors, condition violations and disciplinary issues.

One tool is designed to supplement existing dynamic risk and needs assessments,¹ and the second assessment is referred to as a stand-alone women's risk/needs assessment that incorporates both gender-neutral and gender-responsive scales. Four jurisdictions were chosen to further develop and then validate the tools, and some of the traditional, gender-neutral, risk/needs scales were reframed to reflect gender-responsive issues. Currently, a number of state and local agencies are in the process of implementation, which provides additional opportunity to further validation. For more information, go to www.uc.edu/womenoffenders.

Women Offender Case Management Model

In 2005, NIC collaborated with Orbis Partners Inc. of Ottawa, Canada, to develop and test a women offender case management model (WOCMM). Marilyn VanDieten, Ph.D., lead the project for Orbis.² The model merged both evidence-based practices and gender-responsive research and practice, and was designed to accompany a woman from prison to community release and supervision, as well as direct sentence from the courts to probation. The model is designed to not only enhance risk reduction but increase the health and well-being of women, their families and communities. As with the women's risk/need work (WRNA), an extensive review of the criminal justice, mental health and child welfare literature guided by a working group of practitioners and researchers forms the foundation for WOCMM. The model, piloted in three jurisdictions, completed both a process and outcome evaluation in one of the sites.

The WOCMM model requires the use of a WRNA or gender-informed dynamic risk assessment instrument for women and a team approach to the delivery of case management services. The female offender is very much part of the team, which also consists of a correctional case manager, service providers and other supports that would be linked to the women's risk/needs, as well as others she might identify as sources of support. The woman is intentionally engaged in the change process and her strengths are identified and capitalized upon in the case planning process. The WOCMM team builds partnerships with services such as housing, transportation and treatment to ensure that necessary resources are in place and accessible by the woman.

An important feature of WOCMM is that it helps women develop resources that they can employ even after being released. The model is more fully described in the WOCMM model document online at <http://www.nicic.org/Library/021814>.

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Gender-Informed Practice Assessment

Through a cooperative agreement, NIC partnered with the Center for Effective Public Policy to further develop a tool to assess correctional environments and practices for women in prison settings. The Gender-Informed Practice Assessment (GIPA), is not intended to be used as an audit tool. It is designed to assess 12 domains of appropriate gender-informed practice, including leadership and philosophy; links with the community for reentry support; facility operations, including the physical plant; management and operations; staffing and training; institutional culture; offender management (incorporating sanctions and discipline); assessment and classification; case management, transitional planning and programming; and institutional services (e.g., medical, mental health, transportation, food, legal and victim services).

GIPA was built upon gender-responsive and evidence-based practices and has a variety of potential uses. The tool has been used as a gap analysis of current institutional prac-

tices specific to women, which could also form the basis for empirical support for funding requests. GIPA was also designed to support quality assurance processes and provide the feedback needed to improve current programs and other aspects of a facility (e.g., staffing, culture, services and facility operations). The tool has been piloted in three locations and has been revised based on the pilot study feedback. For more information, visit the NIC website at www.nicic.gov/womenoffenders. As research and knowledge emerges, the NIC's women offender initiative will continue to update offerings and make those products available to the field to improve management of women offenders.

ENDNOTES

¹ Andrews, D. A. and Bonta, James L. 1999. LSI-R:SV Level of Service Inventory Revised: Screening Version User's Manual. Toronto: Multi-Health Systems.

Brennan, T., Dieterich, W. & Ehret, B. 2006. Evaluating the Predictive Validity of the COMPAS Risk and Needs Assessment System. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, January 2009; vol. 36, 1: pp. 21-40.

² *Women offender case management model*. 2006. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections.

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