



Research at a glance

Spotlight on Results of “*Twenty Years Later: Revisiting the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women*”

KEY WORDS: *women offenders, Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, Shaw survey, health, substance abuse*

Why we did this study

In 1989, a Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women was created in order to examine the lives, experiences and broader social context of women serving federal sentences in Canada. To do so, the Task Force appointed a team of researchers to survey all federally sentenced women in Canada. The ensuing report provided recommendations for the future of women's corrections.

Twenty years later, after the implementation of a number of the recommendations, the approach to women's corrections within the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) has dramatically improved. Given the passage of time and the significant changes made, an update to the original 1989 survey was identified as a research priority.

What we did

The current survey was intended to be similar to the original survey. It covered a broad range of areas affecting women offenders, including: health and wellbeing, interpersonal relationships, education and employment, correctional facilities, community connections and release, and programming. Updated surveys were distributed to all federally sentenced women incarcerated in one of the regional facilities in the fall of 2007. One hundred and seventy eight (178) women participated in the survey. Data from the survey and women's comments were analyzed. The following presents highlights of some of the results pertaining to the each of the domains assessed.

What we found

Chapter I: A Profile of Federal Women Offenders

Most women participating in the current study were aged between 25 and 44 years of age (65%), with more than half self-identifying as Caucasian (57%) and approximately one third self-identifying as Aboriginal (32%). The majority of the sample was serving a sentence between 2 and 5 years (79%), and 12% were serving a life sentence. Half of the sample were classified as medium security (50%), 41% as minimum security, and only 9% were classified as maximum security. Notably, Aboriginal women were more likely to be classified as medium or maximum security than non-Aboriginal women. Just under half of the sample (49%) were convicted for a violent offence and approximately one quarter (27%) were convicted of a drug

related offence. Aboriginal women were significantly more likely to be convicted of a violent offence.

Chapter II: Towards Achieving Health and Wellbeing

In terms of physical health, as compared to the original survey, many more women (81%) in the current survey reported participating in physical activities. However, the majority of women wanted more opportunities for, and different types of, physical (90%) and recreational (78%) activities (e.g. sports, crafts, music). Women also indicated they wanted easier access to dentists (66%) and doctors (50%) and the opportunity to see specialists (e.g., gynecologist, nutritionists, testing for STIs). Some women noted dissatisfaction with the adequacy and availability of both physical and mental health facilities.

With regards to spirituality and its impact on wellbeing, over 50% of women at each site reported that their spiritual needs were *sometimes* to *always* met, with the most positive responses reported at the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge.

Consistent with, though even higher than, the 1989 survey, a high rate of drug and alcohol use was found, with over half the women identifying a current or previous drug addiction and over one third a current or previous alcohol addiction.

Just under half of the women in the current survey had engaged in self-harm, a slight decrease from the 1989 survey, with self-harm being more likely for women incarcerated for a violent offence. Many of those endorsing self-harm indicated that a primary motivation for this behaviour was as a means of coping with emotional pain.

Chapter III: Interpersonal Relationships: Victimization, Family & Maintaining Social Support

In terms of victimization, the majority of women (86%) reported being physically abused at some point in their lives. As compared to the original survey this represents a significant increase as in 1991 68% of the women reported experiencing physical abuse. In general, a greater proportion of women were abused as adults, although over half of the women were also abused as children and/or as teenagers. Approximately two-thirds of the women (68%) reported that they had been sexually abused. This also represents an increase in the rates of sexual abuse being

reported by the women (i.e., the self-reported rate was 54% in the original survey).

Just over three quarters of the women (77%) indicated that they were mothers and the age of their children varied greatly ranging from 7 months to 45 years. A considerable portion of the women (42%) kept in touch with their children, at least weekly, however one-third of the women had little or no contact. The women indicated that they would appreciate more consistent opportunities for normal visits, private family visits, and temporary absence options in order to keep in touch with their family. The women also suggested that technical issues arising with the phone systems sometimes restrict their ability to contact their children.

In terms of maintenance of social support most women (63%) reported having weekly contact with friends, family, and community supports. Challenges highlighted by many of the women included costs of staying in touch (53%), transportation difficulties (20%), and emotional difficulty (28%).

Chapter IV: Education and Employment

Sixty-percent of women reported having less than a high school education (22% had less than a grade 8 education).

Prior to incarceration, 64% of women supported themselves financially by working, while 49% reported using social assistance. 75% also indicated supporting themselves, in part, through illegal activity (e.g., dealing drugs, prostitution)¹.

In terms of occupation prior to incarceration, women most often reported being a stay-at-home-mother/child-care provider (47%). Positions in sales or serving (42%), or in domestic fields (e.g., housekeeping; 30%) were also held by a number of women. Some women (24%) further reported that upon release they were hoping to work as professionals, while fewer anticipated being stay-at-home-mothers (24%) or working in sales/serving (23%).

Most women (87%) reported working while incarcerated including positions in maintenance, services (e.g., food, stores) or with CORCAN Graphics.

¹ Many women indicated they supported themselves through more than one mean, therefore numbers sum to more than 100%.

Chapter V: Inside Women's Correctional Facilities

Although nearly all women (93%) reported that they *usually* got along with staff, they indicated a need for staff training surrounding issues that affect women in general, as well as Aboriginal women specifically. Some of the women (56%) felt it was important for staff to have a better understanding of issues such as women's victimization, mental health and substance use. A number of Aboriginal women (34%) felt staff could benefit from specific training, including a better understanding of their cultural/spiritual practices.

Despite reporting that they typically got along with housemates and other inmates (72%), conflict, arguments and physical fights were most often attributed to housing issues (e.g., food, hygiene), communication problems, frustration, victimization/provocation and intimate relationships. Several women stated that bullying was an issue in the institutions.

Chapter VI: Programming in Women's Corrections

Results from the 1989 survey indicated the need to improve programming for women offenders. In the current study, the most commonly taken programs were the Women Offender Substance Abuse Program (70%), Anger and Emotions Management (29%), Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (28%) and Survivors of Abuse and Trauma (23%). With regards to Aboriginal correctional programming, participation rates were lower with 24% of women having taken Spirit of a Warrior and 18% taking Circles of Change. However, over half of Aboriginal women (52%) indicated having experience with Aboriginal spiritual and cultural programming. The increase in number of programs offered, and the availability of programming specific to Aboriginal women were noted improvements from the original survey.

Many of the women offered positive comments regarding the programs themselves, in terms of the content of the programs and the impact experienced by the women as a result of participation. However, several issues were raised regarding the implementation of programming. Specifically, frustrations related to the availability and accessibility of programs, the frequency with which programs were offered, and wait lists were raised. Accessibility issues

were highlighted as particularly impactful for women classified as maximum security².

Chapter VII: Community Connection and Release

The majority of women (79%) indicated that they found contact with community groups or individuals from outside of the institutional environment to be beneficial. They indicated that this form of contact is enjoyable, permits them to “experience” life outside of their facility as they have discussions with community members, creates a sense of community, and brings an overall feeling of hope and optimism.

Just under two-thirds of the women indicated that they wanted more contact with individual volunteers and social or community groups. Just under half of the women (43%) indicated that they wanted more contact with Aboriginal or spiritual leaders and community advocacy groups.

When asked about their planned living arrangements upon release, almost three quarters of the women reported wanting to live with family. Approximately one quarter of the women indicated that living where there were community supports / Elders and work was very important to them.

A large majority of the women (87%) indicated that they plan on using various services in the community upon their release. The largest areas of need in terms of anticipated use of services are in the areas of finding employment (65%), finding a place to live (57%), assistance with drug and alcohol abuse (54%), and seeking training for employment (53%).

Importantly, 53% of the women in this sample had been previously released and over half of these women (58%) indicated that during their previous release they did not feel that they had received the kind of support and services they required to succeed in the community.

What it means

This survey provides an updated profile of the experiences and needs of federally sentenced women in Canada. The current survey highlights areas in women’s corrections that

have improved and areas that may benefit from further development. CSC can utilize these findings to address implicated areas. Moreover, these findings can serve to strengthen CSC’s capacity to support Women Offenders and its ability to address the unique needs of this population.

CSC has taken several steps forward since the original survey in 1991. For example, the original survey identified institutional employment as an area that required improvement. Since then, changes have occurred to address the employment and employability needs of women offenders. The National Employment Strategy for Women Offenders was developed, aiming to increase the number of practical/relevant job opportunities for women in institutions and communities.

Additionally, since the original survey, mandatory training for staff working in women’s facilities has been implemented emphasizing a variety of issues relating to the management of women offenders (e.g., counseling, sexism, communication and negotiation skills). However, some concerns reported by the women suggests a need for continued work in this area. Results of this study suggest that it may be of benefit to re-assess the frequency of refresher training courses for staff, or the use of other more informal tactics (e.g., workshops, speakers) to encourage *ongoing* staff training and development.

In 2008 CSC launched an anti-bullying initiative aimed at promoting offender accountability while creating safe and respectful institutional environments. As part of this strategy, staff receive anti-bullying training and inmates are provided with information concerning bullying behaviours. Although somewhat new in its implementation it is anticipated that this will begin to address concerns raised by the women.

Notwithstanding the considerable improvements made in the past 20 years, areas for continued focus were also noted in the survey. For example, in the realm of health and wellbeing, areas for future consideration include improved access to medical professionals and mental health services and a continued focus on the role of substance use and self-harming behaviours as coping mechanisms.

The importance of maintaining a healthy family bond while incarcerated can not be underestimated and these results

² Since the completion of this survey, the Women’s Modular Intervention Program has been implemented for women classified as maximum security

provide insight regarding challenges faced by the women in achieving this goal. Furthermore, these results speak to the high rates of victimization experienced by the women and the need to acknowledge and respond to this in our efforts to support women in their reintegration efforts.

Even with the above noted progress in the realm of education and employment, women continue to desire more opportunities and variety in the vocational training and employment options available to them.

Although the current survey highlighted improvements to programming in women's corrections since the initial survey, it also highlights areas that may benefit from further development. Most notably, recommendations are made with regard to operational issues related to the effective implementation of programming. CSC can utilize these findings to address implicated areas. Moreover, these results can inform the development and implementation of the new Women Offenders Correctional Program.

Overall, it appears that women are interested in seeking community support during their period of incarceration and plan to use a variety of community services upon their release. These findings underline the critical nature of forming, retaining, and utilizing strong partnerships with community stakeholders while at the same time providing support for CSC's continued commitment to a continuity of care in reintegration efforts.

For more information

Barrett, M. R., Allenby, K., & Taylor, K. (2010). *Twenty years later: Revisiting the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women*. Research Report R-222. Ottawa: Correctional Service Canada.

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