

## **Gender-Responsive Supervision and Programming for Women Offenders in the Community**

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Women continue to represent a growing percentage of correctional populations nationwide. The vast majority of these women are under community supervision (probation or parole). In 1998, nearly 1 million women were under correctional supervision in the United States. Of those, 85 percent, or over 800,000 women, were on probation or parole (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999a). Between 1990 and 1998, the per capita number of women under probation supervision rose 40 percent and the per capita number of women under parole supervision was up 80 percent (BJS, 1999a; BJS, 1999b).

This significant increase in women under correctional supervision has called attention to their status in the criminal justice system and to the particular circumstances they encounter within the system. There is a growing body of data regarding the characteristics of women in prisons and jails (see Owen and Bloom, 1995; Chesney-Lind, 1997); however, despite the fact that the greatest numbers of women offenders are under community supervision, there is far less information available on their characteristics and needs. Furthermore, little is known about gender-responsive supervision issues and strategies, treatment approaches, and characteristics that contribute to effective programs and promote successful outcomes for women offenders (Bloom, 1998a).

In order to increase the rates of successful completion of community supervision by women offenders and reduce the number of women who are re-arrested and re-involved in the criminal justice system, there is a need to design gender-responsive community supervision and treatment approaches. It is critically important to document approaches that are related to positive outcomes for this population, so that promising supervision and program models can be presented to criminal justice policy makers and practitioners.

### **Characteristics of Women Under Community Supervision**

If we are to design effective supervision and treatment approaches that match women offenders' needs, it is important to consider the demographic and social history of this population, as well as how various life factors impact their patterns of offending.

The characteristics of criminal justice-involved women reflect a population that is triply marginalized by race, class, and gender (see Bloom, 1996).

- Women offenders are low income, disproportionately women of color, undereducated, and unskilled, with sporadic employment histories.
- They are less likely to have committed violent offenses and more likely to have been convicted of crimes involving drugs or property. Often their property offenses are economically driven, motivated by poverty and/or the abuse of alcohol and other drugs.
- Women confront problems that tend to be unique to their gender, such as sexual abuse, sexual assault, domestic violence, and single parenthood.
- Similar to all women in the criminal justice system, the majority of women under community supervision are single mothers. An estimated 72 percent of women on probation have young children (BJS, 1999a).
- Many women suffer from some form of mental illness or co-occurring disorder. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (1999c), nearly 8 in 10 female mentally ill offenders reported prior physical or sexual abuse. Often women encounter the justice system as girls because they have run away from home, often to escape situations involving violence and sexual/physical abuse.
- They begin to use alcohol and other drugs at an early age, and an increasing number of studies have found a correlation between addiction among women and histories of physical and sexual abuse. Interviews with adult women offenders indicate a link between their offense and their history of victimization and substance abuse (Belknap, 1996; Covington, 1998).
- A result of severed social relations, economic vulnerability, addiction, and abuse, homelessness is a frequent complication in the lives of criminal justice-involved women (Bloom, 1998b). North and Smith (1993) reported that homeless women are far more likely to have young children in their care and to be more dependent on public assistance than their male counterparts. They are also more likely (23 percent) than men (4 percent) to be victims of sexual abuse (North and Smith, 1993).

In summary, the women in the criminal justice system have histories of trauma and substance abuse. Most are nonviolent and are not considered to be threats to the community. Their most common pathways to crime are based on survival (of abuse and poverty) and substance abuse. Their greatest needs are for comprehensive treatment for drug abuse and trauma recovery, education and training in job and parenting skills, and safe and sober housing.

### **Supervision and Program Approaches and Strategies**

Criminal justice supervision, programs, and services have been based on the male experience, primarily due to the preponderance of men in the criminal justice system as compared to women. Consequently, the supervision and program needs of women have been largely ignored. As a result of this lack of attention to women under correctional supervision, we have very little empirical evidence indicating what works for women offenders.

The goals of most probation and parole agencies are to provide for public safety and reduce offender recidivism. Increasing caseloads have made it necessary to focus on offenders who are at high risk to public safety. Women, who typically commit low level property and drug crimes, are generally not a danger to their

communities. Therefore, they tend to be ignored despite the fact that their success or failure has a profound impact on their children, families, and other social service systems. Failure often means a woman's increased involvement in the criminal justice system, which may lead to family fragmentation. Success, on the other hand, can mean that a woman is in charge of her life, in recovery from trauma and dependency, and fostering healthy children and families with resources and community support.

As a result of the overwhelming numbers of offenders being placed on probation, the traditional means of supervising both men and women has changed from case management to a surveillance model. However, returning to a case management approach and utilizing a relational model of supervision is a strategy that may assist probation officers in working with women offenders. Since women typically manage

their lives in the context of relationships, building trust with a female probationer is an important step in helping her to be successful on probation. Family mentoring and/or other community support is critical for a woman's continued success in the community. Engaging the family, particularly her children, in her recovery process can promote successful outcomes for a woman.

If community supervision is to be successful with women offenders, strategies that are gender-responsive need to be developed and implemented. Effective supervision strategies and programming for women should be tailored to their unique situations and reflect women's pathways into the criminal justice system. These strategies and programs should be based on sound theoretical approaches to treatment, asset-based, multi-modal, and sensitive to the differences among women (Covington, 1998).

### What Works?

Research supported by the National Institute of Corrections and conducted by Austin, Bloom, and Donahue (1992) identified effective strategies for working with women offenders in community correctional settings. This study found that the most promising community-based programs for women offenders did not employ the medical or clinical model of correctional treatment. Instead, they worked with clients to broaden their range of responses to various types of behavior and needs, enhancing their coping and decision-making skills. These programs use an "empowerment" model of skill building to develop competencies that enable

women to achieve independence. In addition, effective therapeutic approaches are multidimensional; they deal with specific women's issues, including substance abuse, domestic violence, sexual abuse, pregnancy and parenting, relationships, and

### Core Concepts for Developing Gender-Responsive Programs (see Bloom and Covington, 1998)

- Equality does not mean sameness; equality of service delivery is not simply about providing women access to services traditionally reserved for men. Equality must be defined in terms of providing opportunities that are relevant to each gender. Thus, services and interventions may appear very different depending on to whom they are being delivered.
- Gender-responsive programs are not simply "women only" programs that were designed for men.
- Females' sense of self is manifested and develops differently in female-specific groups as opposed to coed groups.
- The unique needs and issues of women should be addressed in a safe, trusting, and supportive women-focused environment.
- Whenever possible, women should be treated in the least restrictive programming environment available. The level of security should depend on both treatment needs and concern for public safety.
- Programs should promote cultural awareness and sensitivity and should draw on the cultural resources and strengths in various communities.

gender bias. Other studies of women offenders highlight the importance of relationships and the fact that criminal involvement is often connected to relationships with family members or significant others (Owen and Bloom, 1995; Owen, 1998).

The National Institute of Corrections has found that a system-wide approach is essential to effectively address the needs of this population. In a system-wide approach, agencies recognize the interrelated nature of criminal justice and human services systems, including the community, the courts, corrections, and other organizations. The approach involves bringing key system players to the table to analyze available information, develop shared objectives, and implement policy on this population at each decision point in the system.

Specific strategies that may be useful to a probation or parole department include:

- **Developing comprehensive screening and assessment tools** that have been validated on a female population. These tools need not come from the field of corrections; in fact, some valuable screening and assessment tools come from the fields of chemical dependency, public health, mental health, and social services. These assessments may be helpful in referring women to an appropriate intervention.
- **Implementing women-only caseloads** supervised by probation or parole officers interested and trained in the issues of women offenders. Individualized case planning and referrals to appropriate community-based agencies can also help women to successfully complete probation or parole.
- **Becoming advocates.** This approach is not always looked upon favorably by community corrections agencies, but it is an important part of supervision services. Because women comprise such a small proportion of the total offender population, their needs tend to be overlooked in departmental planning efforts. Consequently, advocacy efforts should be a part of probation and/or parole work with women offenders.

From an organizational standpoint, it is also important to have management support and a mission statement that includes gender-responsive principles.

The following are key aspects of the community corrections business which require thoughtful review and development of gender-responsive approaches in order to improve outcomes for women under community supervision:

- Effective assessment and classification tools (risk, needs, pre-trial release, health/mental health, substance abuse, employability);
- Philosophy of supervision (surveillance vs. treatment);
- Content of supervision (address women's needs);
- Model of supervision (relational, case management, team approach, individual and/or group counseling);
- Relationship to the community (what services are available and who is responsible for delivery; what needs are better met by community agencies);
- Recruitment, training, education, and attributes of probation and parole officers supervising women (cross-training);

- Caseload, workload size, and specialized caseloads (gender-responsive; mental health);
- Rules of supervision—are they gender-responsive?; and
- Emerging trends in sanctioning that may be more effective in working with women (e.g., restorative justice, family group conferencing).

Supervision approaches need to focus on issues such as cross-gender supervision, appropriate relationships between staff and offenders, and gender-responsive interventions for women offenders. Correctional practitioners need current information regarding promising approaches to mental health problems, substance abuse, and trauma. Gender-responsive curricula and training programs need to be developed for correctional administrators, staff, and program providers. A probation or parole officer who has a comprehensive knowledge of services for women in the community can make referrals to agencies and organizations that specifically address women's needs; these may include health clinics, substance abuse treatment, support groups, domestic violence, and other social services.

### **Women's Treatment Issues and Needs**

As the research literature suggests, substance abuse is a primary factor in women's involvement in the criminal justice system (Bloom, Chesney-Lind, and Owen, 1994). As such, substance abuse treatment needs to be included as part of community corrections. Women on probation and parole who are mandated to drug treatment are often referred to community treatment programs. Because men outnumber women in drug treatment by about five to one (Abbott, 1994), many programs are co-gender and based on a male model of addiction. However, men and women experience differences in terms of their recovery process. Men in recovery tend to emphasize the problems caused by the consequences of drug use, and women more often report the "stressors" leading to drug use (Ryan, 1981). After entry into treatment programs, women find recovery complicated by child care issues, inadequate social support systems, and lack of financial resources (Ryan, 1981). They also suffer from higher rates of eating disorders, co-occurring disorders, and health problems. Treatment for women probationers and parolees must take these complex issues into account.

Special programs are also needed to address the needs of women probationers and parolees with mental illness and co-occurring disorders. These can include mental health programs provided by community mental health agencies or probation, special supervision practices, and system integration strategies. Veysey (1994) notes that individuals on probation who have mental illness require access to a full range of mental health services.

### **Assessing Policies and Programs for Gender-Responsivity**

It is helpful for agencies and jurisdictions to undertake a thorough review of its policies and programs regarding women offenders. Often, due to a paucity of programs, women are assigned to the programs and services that are available regardless of whether these programs meet the particular needs of the offender.

Following are some questions that may be useful in an assessment of an agency's or jurisdiction's approaches for women:

- Does the policy/practice encourage gender-specific assessment tools and treatment plans, and does it match appropriate treatment with the identified needs of the women and girls it serves?
- Is the policy/practice grounded in theory, and is it accurately designed around statistical data and developmental research that is verifiable and reliable?
- Does the policy/practice acknowledge and value the worth of individuals, regardless of their backgrounds and offense histories?
- Does the policy/practice acknowledge and affirm commonalities and respect differences among and within groups (e.g., race, class, and sexual orientation)?
- Does the staff reflect the client population in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation?
- In co-correctional settings, what is the ratio of women to men? Do men substantially outnumber women?
- If the program is for women only, what is the composition of the staff in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation?
- What are the program's mission, goals, and objectives? Is there mention of the unique needs of women and interventions specific to this population?
- Does the program emphasize a "relational" treatment approach and encourage the development of growth-producing, trusting, and healthy relationships?
- Does the program begin at the point where the woman is in her life and proceed in a manner that is sensitive to the pace and direction that she chooses?
- Does the program utilize positive female role models and mentors?
- Does the program address trauma related to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse?
- Does the program address chemical dependency within a context of trauma related to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse?
- Does the program address pregnancy and parenting issues, including family reunification?
- Does the program provide for development of skills that may lead to future employment in both traditional and nontraditional settings?
- Does the program address issues related to transition to the community (e.g., safe and affordable housing, aftercare, job training and placement, and childcare)?
- Does the program offer components such as individual change (e.g., drug treatment), relational change (e.g., dealing with destructive relationships), and community change (e.g., altering the cultural and structural contexts surrounding women, which may contribute to their problems or solutions)?
- Is the program child-friendly? Is the environment conducive to enhancing family relationships? Does it offer services to women and their children and caregivers?



- Does the program emphasize the building of support systems (e.g., women's resource networks, childcare networks, transportation assistance, advocacy organizations, and racial, ethnic, and cultural programs)?
- Does the agency provide staff training in gender-specific and culturally appropriate issues and service delivery?

### **A Framework for Successful Intervention**

Women involved in the criminal justice system present different circumstances and needs than those of their male counterparts. Effective gender-responsive supervision strategies and approaches must address these issues. Successful interventions should relate to the social realities from which women come and to which they will return. They must also be sensitive to cultural differences and expectations; supervision and program approaches need to reflect this awareness. We are learning more about how to treat women offenders and design interventions that are tailored to their needs.

Covington and Bloom (1999) suggest a need to shift the question of "What works?" to "What is the work?" They propose the following framework:

- **Prevent justice system entry**—Create a community response to the issues that impact women's lives and increase their risk for criminal justice involvement. In order to prevent women from entering the system, community-based substance abuse treatment, economic support, and a community response to violence against women should be provided.
- **Do no harm**—Create alternatives to secure custody for women in the criminal justice system. Modify policies and procedures that often re-traumatize survivors of prior abuse.
- **Create gender-responsive services**—Provide services (both context and content) that are comprehensive and relate to the reality of women's lives. Programs should consider larger issues of poverty, race, and gender inequalities as well as individual factors that impact women in the criminal justice system.
- **Build community support**—Create a system of support within communities that provides assistance (housing, employment, transportation, family reunification, child care, drug and alcohol treatment, peer support, and aftercare) to women who are returning to their communities.

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