

## FEMALE OFFENDER RECIDIVISM

**Question:** What are the risk factors associated with female offenders' continuation in crime?

**Background:** Women represent less than 10% of incarcerated offenders. As a result, less research has been devoted to female offenders compared to males. An important task for corrections is to assess, in a reliable way, an offender's risk to reoffend. Such assessments are required for decisions on release from prison, levels of supervision in the community and matching the intensity of treatment programs. Most risk scales used to predict recidivism, however, have been standardized with samples of male offenders. The question then arises, are the assessment instruments and risk factors used for male offenders applicable to female offenders?

**Method:** Two studies were conducted. The first evaluated whether the Statistical Information on Recidivism (SIR) scale is relevant to women. This risk scale was developed for use with male offenders by the Ministry Secretariat and is now routinely

used by the Correctional Service of Canada and the National Parole Board as an indication of the risk of general recidivism. The SIR scale combines 15 factors related to criminal activity and social functioning. Scores on the SIR scale have been shown to relate systematically to the recidivism of male offenders.

In Study 1, SIR scale scores were calculated for women released from federal institutions in 1983-84. The second study examined additional factors not included in the SIR scale on a second female offender sample. Data from this study were drawn from a survey of federally sentenced women conducted in 1989-90. Follow-up data were available for 136 female offenders. Recidivism was defined as a reconviction or a parole revocation within three years of release and was coded from police criminal history records.

**Answer:** The recidivism rate for the first sample of female offenders was 35.8%. In general, the total SIR score was significantly associated with recidivism

( $r = .25$ ). Applying the standards developed for males to this sample, almost half of the women (44.4%) were categorized as Very Good risk. However, an item analysis of the SIR scale revealed that only two items on the scale predicted future criminal activity: age at first adult conviction and sentence length.

The recidivism rate for the female offenders in Study 2 was 55.2%. Several variables that are commonly found to predict male offenders' risk to reoffend were *not* associated with female recidivism. For example, a history of juvenile delinquency, weapon use, and substance abuse did not predict a return to crime. In contrast, age and criminal history variables, important predictors for males, were also predictive for females. Finally, a history of physical abuse as an adult and self-injurious behaviour were found to be significant predictors for women.

### Policy Implications:

1. Although the total SIR scale score predicted recidivism, only two items from the SIR predicted re-offending and nearly half of female offenders were classified as Very Good risks.

Therefore, the evidence to support the application of the SIR scale with female offenders is weak.

2. The second study found that a number of variables associated with male recidivism were not predictive of female offenders' risk to reoffend. This finding suggests a need for further research in clarifying the variables that may be uniquely associated with female recidivism.
3. Additional research is necessary to construct new objective risk assessments that will predict female recidivism. Improved risk assessments could assist in guiding release decisions, supervision policies and the allocation of treatment resources.

SOURCE: Bonta, J., Pang, B., & Wallace-Capretta, S. (1995). "Predictors of Recidivism Among Incarcerated Female Offenders", The Prison Journal, 75 (3), pp. 227-294.

For further information contact:

Suzanne Wallace-Capretta  
Solicitor General Canada  
340 Laurier Avenue West  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0P8  
Tel (613) 991-2826  
Fax (613) 990-8295  
e-mail wallacs@sgc.gc.ca

Also available on Solicitor General Canada's Internet Site @<http://www.sgc.gc.ca>