

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *What Works for Female Offenders*

Dowden, C. and Andrews, D.A. (1999). *What Works for Female Offenders: A Meta-Analytic Review*. *Crime & Delinquency*, 45: 4, 438-452.

**Key Words:** supervision, responsiveness, criminogenic needs, risk, recidivism, R-N-R principles, treatment

### *Improving Outcomes for Women*

#### **Summary/Conclusions**

Research on criminal justice populations tends to focus on male offenders. In an effort to determine if the risk-needs-responsivity principles of effective correctional treatment apply to women, the authors conducted a meta-analytical review of the literature. The researchers analyzed the results of 26 separate studies that were conducted with women only or women were a predominant portion of the study. The meta-analytical review indicated "that the risk, need and general responsiveness were important contributors to treatment outcome for female offenders."

#### **Limitations of Information**

The study results are limited by the size of the sample. Although 26 unique studies were included in the meta-analysis, only 16 studies were conducted exclusively with female offenders. The other studies included women as a portion of the sample studied. As with all meta-analyses, the results are limited by the quality of the original studies for which results are included in the analysis. For example, although the studies included offenders, the type or intensity of supervision may have varied.

**Caveat:** The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Most research with criminal populations is conducted with male offenders. Using data from previous work, this study explored the risk, needs, and responsiveness (RNR) principles as they relate to female offenders. The researchers were curious if women would share the same criminogenic needs as those identified for male samples and if the RNR principles applied across gender lines. The study used a sample of 26 unique studies, which included samples exclusively or predominantly comprised of women. The studies that were included utilized both an experimental and control group to determine outcomes with treatment modalities. To measure outcomes in this study, researchers identified women in the sample studies as high or low risk, they examined how many criminogenic needs were addressed in the treatment programs, and then explored how many of the RNR principles the program incorporated.

The meta-analysis found a wide range of effect sizes. Overall, the recidivism rate was 43% for those who received treatment and 57% for those who were included in the control group. Stronger treatment effects were found when: treatment targeted higher versus lower risk offenders; programs focused on criminogenic rather than non-criminogenic needs; and the intervention "used behavioral-social learning versus nonbehavioral treatment strategies." Moreover, "programs that appropriately implemented the principles of risk, need, and responsiveness within their framework were associated with reductions in reoffending." Regarding specific

criminogenic need areas, the highest reductions in reoffending resulted when treatment targeted some of the top criminogenic need areas: anti-social peers and anti-social cognition. Slight increases in recidivism were found when looking at school/work and substance abuse variables (lesser criminogenic need areas). In sum, it appears women have the same criminogenic need areas and can benefit from interventions based on the RNR principles.

#### **Practical Applications**

- ✓ Make certain that assessments are completed with a high degree of quality to accurately identify the most pressing criminogenic needs.
- ✓ Prioritize and focus the most intensive services with those clients who have been assessed at higher risk to reoffend.
- ✓ After addressing stability needs, address the client's top criminogenic needs via SMART goals (specific, measureable, achievable, realistic, and time-framed). Address lesser criminogenic needs only as needed.
- ✓ Utilize role plays to help clients practice CBT techniques and rehearse for real life scenarios.
- ✓ When different facilitators or providers are available for clients, try to match with client learning styles.
- ✓ Maximize the use of social learning or cognitive based programs.
- ✓ When making treatment referrals, ensure the "treatment" addresses more criminogenic than non-criminogenic needs.

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