

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Poverty, Recidivism, and Women Offenders

Holtfreter, K., Reisig, M., and Morash, M. (2004). *Poverty, State Capital, and Recidivism Among Women Offenders*. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 3: 2, 185-208.

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Resources and Economically Disadvantaged Women

Summary/Conclusions

Noting women are disproportionately effected by poverty in the United States, the researchers used a sample of female felony probationers and parolees to study the effect of poverty on recidivism. The study was based on a sample of 134 felony offenders in Oregon and Minnesota. Researchers compared the recidivism (rearrest or violation) rates for the first six months of community supervision. Results indicated poor offenders were more likely to recidivate in the six month study period. Analysis also revealed recidivism risk was reduced when women received state-sponsored assistance (affordable or subsidized housing and/or life skills programming).

Limitations of Information

The sample size began with a total of 402 women; but, recidivism analyses used a reduced sample of 134 offenders. Women dropped out for a variety of reasons: fiscal constraints on the study, absconding, relocation. Attrition created a significant difference between the two groups with regard to mean age and percent poverty. The sample size was further reduced to 98 women, who completed the six month follow-up interview.

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.

Researchers using samples from Oregon and Minnesota, explored the impact of poverty on risk assessment, as well as recidivism. Poverty was defined using the federal guidelines; overall risk was established using the LSI-R; and recidivism was determined by self-reports of rearrest or supervision violation within approximately the first six months on probation or parole.

Exploring poverty, the researchers found that three subcomponents of the LSI-R were significantly related to poverty, "which suggests that poor women offenders report existing or prior problems with alcohol and/or drugs, employment troubles and less formal education, as well as financial instability." The strongest relationship observed in the independent variables used was risk and poverty; however, when controlling for poverty, the LSI-R did not predict well for overall risk of the women to recidivate. (This result is suspect due to the small sample size and the effect attrition had on the final analysis. See Limitations of Information.)

Given the impact of poverty on a female offender's ability to succeed under supervision, the researchers questioned if tapping state-sponsored resources might lower an offender's risk. The study defined state-sponsored resources as housing or life skills programming (e.g. employment assistance, developing interviewing skills, etc.). They found that offenders who received assistance did better. Specifically, results indicated that "providing state-sponsored resources to poor women offenders is inversely and significantly

related to recidivism. Poor women who did not receive either form of state-sponsored assistance were approximately 3.3 times more likely to reoffend than recipients (45% versus 14%, respectively."

Practical Applications

- ✓ Utilize the case plan to prioritize the probationer's immediate needs, while keeping track of the longer-term behavioral goals.
- ✓ Provide housing assistance for short-term residential needs and follow-up with referrals to local aid agencies.
- ✓ Front-load supervision services to make an immediate impact on the probationer's needs.
- ✓ Assist probationers with employment by referring to the local county Work Force, referring to Vocational Rehabilitation, or taking time to practice interviewing skills, assist with completing applications, or provide felon-friendly employer lists.
- ✓ Build collaborative relationships with social services, United Way, Catholic Charities, and other community agencies that can provide the "capital" for support that offender service funds can't sustain.
- ✓ Utilize offender service funds to provide child care, obtain food, secure appropriate clothing.
- ✓ Management is recommended to discuss the use of offender service funds to ensure all staff understand how they can be used, when they can be used, and the department's philosophy of providing financial assistance to probationers.