



# Assessing the Risk and Needs of Women in Jails

**An increased interest in female** correctional populations began in the 1990s, the result of the growing numbers of women becoming involved with the criminal justice system (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010). At the same time, researchers and scholars alike began to highlight the differences between male and female offenders (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003) and question a range of common “gender-neutral” correctional practices, including the assessment of the risk and needs of justice-involved women (Hardyman & Van Voorhis, 2004).

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## Development of the Women's Risk/Needs Assessments

In 2004, the National Institute of Corrections entered into a cooperative agreement with the University of Cincinnati to develop improved strategies for assessing female offenders. The research approach was a combined effort between university researchers and policy and planning teams in four States (Colorado, Hawaii, Minnesota, and Missouri). The group sought to merge two offender rehabilitation paradigms:

- The Canadian model, also known as the principles of effective intervention, which emphasizes risk, need, and responsivity as effective elements for correctional treatment. This perspective emerged from the meta-analytical research of scholars such as Don Andrews, James Bonta, and Paul Gendreau (see Andrews & Bonta, 2007).
- The gender-responsive/pathways model, which stresses the importance of women's unique "pathways to crime" created by scholars such as Joanne Belknap, Barbara Bloom, Stephanie Covington, Kathleen Daly, Meda Chesney-Lind, Merry Morash, and Barbara Owen.

The connection between these two paradigms was established through the *needs* principle, one of the key principles of effective intervention identified in the Canadian model. This principle states that correctional treatment of criminogenic needs (characteristics in offenders' lives that are predictive of future criminal offending) is essential to changing offender behavior and reducing recidivism. The gender-responsive/pathways model supports the notion of targeting criminogenic needs, but argues that women have unique needs that are not adequately tapped by current gender-neutral risk/needs assessments (Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009). More specifically, it was determined that women possess a unique set of needs related to:

The Women's Risk Needs Assessment (WRNA) is a stand-alone assessment that incorporates both gender-neutral and gender-responsive scales. The Women's Risk Needs Assessment-Trailer (WRNA-T) is an addendum containing only gender-responsive scales designed to supplement existing gender-neutral risk/needs assessments such as the Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R).

- Abuse and trauma.
- Safety.
- Depression and anxiety.
- Unhealthy relationships.
- Parenting stress.

A number of strengths that act as resiliency factors were also identified, keeping women from becoming involved in future criminal offending. These include:

- Educational assets.
- Parental involvement.
- Supportive relationships.
- Self-efficacy.

The result of this research endeavor was the creation of two Women's Risk/Needs Assessments (WRNAs):

- A full risk/needs assessment, the WRNA, containing both gender-neutral (e.g., criminal history, antisocial attitudes, and antisocial friends) and gender-responsive factors (e.g. abuse and trauma, unhealthy relationships, and parenting stress).
- A supplemental risk/needs assessment, the WRNA-T, for use with existing gender-neutral assessments such as the Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R) (Andrews & Bonta, 1995) and the

Northpointe COMPAS (Brennan, Dieterich, & Oliver, 2006).

Both WRNAs were released in separate versions for probation, prison, and prerelease populations (see [www.uc.edu/womenoffenders](http://www.uc.edu/womenoffenders)). Construction validation research found that the assessments of gender-responsive factors made statistically significant contributions to gender-neutral assessments (Van Voorhis, Wright, Salisbury, & Bauman, 2010). A larger multi-State revalidation study is nearing completion at this time.

## Implementing the WRNAs

Once the WRNAs became available for use, correctional and community agencies across the country began the task of incorporating the new gender-responsive practice into their current systems. To date, jurisdictions in more than 20 States are now utilizing the WRNAs for risk and needs assessments and case planning for supervision agencies, prisons and jails, and community service providers working with reentry populations.

Implementing the WRNAs has not been an easy task, however; successful implementation involves more than simply switching out a gender-neutral assessment for a gender-responsive tool. Those agencies that have implemented the WRNAs identified the following as issues to be addressed during the implementation process:

- Using separate risk/need tools for men and women.
- Utilizing the WRNAs (risk assessment, needs assessment, or both).
- Marketing the new approach to staff and others.
- Coordinating training approaches that build the needed staff competencies for using the WRNAs effectively.
- Developing fidelity measures for the new tools.
- Facilitating automation of the tools.
- Addressing gender-responsive needs through programming,

service provision, staffing, and case planning.

- Crafting new policies and procedures to reflect agency changes.
- Managing the transition—from a gender-neutral to gender-responsive tool—within the agency.

A variety of solutions to these and other issues were identified by agency “implementation teams,” in collaboration with the University of Cincinnati and the National Institute of Corrections. Networking opportunities between multiple agencies going through the same process of implementing the WRNAs also offered unique opportunities for agencies to learn from each other and develop innovative solutions together. (For a discussion of these solutions see Van Voorhis, Bauman, Wright, & Salisbury, 2009, and [www.uc.edu/womenoffenders](http://www.uc.edu/womenoffenders).)

### Implementing WRNAs in Jail Settings

In 2012, 98,600 women were incarcerated in jails across the country (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013), and the interest in implementing gender-responsive approaches for this growing population has increased as well. Although the WRNAs were not created with a jail-based research population, discussions began to emerge as to how the assessments could be utilized with women in jail. Despite a growing body of research on women in prison, research on women in jails remains limited (McCampbell, 2005). Jail administrators engaged in conversations with university research staff and helped to identify a number of factors unique to this population. These discussions have been invaluable in helping to plan for the expansion of the WRNAs into jails. The rest of this article summarizes these considerations and offers suggestions for addressing them.

### Stabilization of Clients

Using the WRNAs as an intake instrument poses a number of difficulties in any setting, but in a jail setting this is often more pronounced. Clients at intake likely experience adjustment to incarceration like those in prison, but in a jail setting these women may

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be struggling with acute legal issues, alcohol and drug detox, mental health needs, child care concerns, etc. While this affords jail staff the opportunity to intervene rapidly in a number of gender-responsive areas, jail staff report that women may be most likely to distrust them at intake and felt that rapport building may be a key to eliciting this type of information. As such, many jail staff felt that the assessments would be most useful for women who had been afforded a period of time to adjust to incarceration.

### **Preconviction Status**

Related to the issue of stabilization, a number of the women in jail are pretrial or presentence. Jail staff expressed concern over this type of population responding honestly to such an in-depth questionnaire, as concerns over legal status and confidentiality may limit the information disclosed. As such, most have agreed that this type of assessment would best be used for women who have been convicted, while a shorter questionnaire designed only to link women to services (and not predict risk) may be best suited for a pretrial population. In fact, one jurisdiction is currently utilizing a shortened WRNA as a checklist for providing pretrial interventions. This provides staff with the ability to quickly refer women to the services that they may need.

### **Population Mobility and Short Sentence Lengths**

Given the nature of jail facilities, the population is constantly changing. Inmates are frequently transported in and out of the facility to court appearances or may be transferred to other facilities or released based upon the outcome of their hearings. Similarly, new inmates are constantly arriving. As such, it is difficult to facilitate treatment groups with such a rapidly changing population. Despite the ability of many correctional treatment programs to facilitate open groups (allowing participants to join at any

time in the program), it is difficult to create an atmosphere of group cohesion with such a rapidly fluctuating population.

Closely connected to mobility, jail staff report that many of the women serve short sentence lengths varying from a few days to a few months. They noted that this caused a great deal of difficulty in providing services because staff had such a limited time period to work with the women. With such a short-term population, it may do more harm than good to ask sensitive questions (e.g., trauma and abuse, relationships) and then not be able to follow up with programs or services for these needs. As such, many have suggested that the tool would be best used with women serving longer sentences in the jails or with jails that have extensive connections to service agencies in the community where women could continue to access services post-release.

### **Budgetary Constraints**

Although the WRNAs are public domain assessments (meaning they are available for use at no cost), training in the use of the assessments is a requirement for all agencies seeking to implement the assessment. In the current economic climate, however, State and local corrections agency budgets for training have been scant. Also, many agencies have acknowledged additional funding needs beyond training: For example, many jails recognized that in order to implement the WRNAs with fidelity, there needed to be programming available to meet the assessed needs of the offenders. They also recognized a number of additional areas—such as validating the tool on the women in their jail to ensure predictive validity—that would need research.

Not to be deterred by finances, many jail administrators reported applying for grants and funding assistance. For example, the Department of Women's Justice Services in Cook County, Illinois, was able to obtain grant funds to

modify and validate the WRNA on its extensive female population. Similarly, the Denver (Colorado) Sheriff's and Ramsey County (Minnesota) Community Corrections Departments were able to collaborate with other agencies in their local areas to acquire technical assistance for WRNA training of jail staff through the National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women ([cjinvolvedwomen.org](http://cjinvolvedwomen.org)). To be sure, despite financial woes, solutions exist for motivated fundraisers (see McCampbell, 2005; [nicic.gov](http://nicic.gov); and [cjinvolvedwomen.org](http://cjinvolvedwomen.org)).

### **Programming Limitations**

The need for additional treatment programming seems to always be at the forefront of discussions about gender-responsive approaches in correctional facilities. Not only did many of the jail administrators express a need for programming within their facilities; they also expressed concerns over program length and participation requirements. The aforementioned difficulties with population mobility and sentence length pose challenges for jail staff who seek to implement correctional programming in these environments. Jail administrators noted that many of the correctional programs they investigated were at least three months in length—longer than many of the women whom they house are incarcerated. None wanted to conduct assessments of the women and release them without providing services, but few could find ideal solutions to help the large number of short-term women in their jails. It may be that the best we can do right now is to target assessment, case planning, and intensive programming to longer-term women and triage shorter-term women for critical needs such as substance abuse, poverty, safety, and mental health problems.

### **Validation Needs**

While the Canadian model has long advocated the use of validated risk and needs assessments with cor-

rectional populations (see Andrews & Bonta, 2007), it is a relatively new idea that assessments that were originally designed for men and applied to women may not be appropriate with female correctional populations (Blanchette & Brown, 2006; Hardyman & Van Voorhis, 2004; Van Voorhis & Presser, 2001). Further, because the WRNAs were developed based on research on female populations in prisons rather than jails, the tools should be used only with populations on which the assessments have been properly validated. Currently, validation efforts are underway at one major jail (the Department of Women's Justice Services in Cook County, Illinois), and others hope to follow suit in the future. These early validation and implementation efforts will be critical to the expansion of the WRNAs into other jails around the country.

## Conclusion

As the types of agencies that use gender-responsive assessments expand to include jails, a number of implementation issues must be considered, and careful thought and planning must go into how to adapt these assessments for use with this unique population of women. Fortunately, a number of other correctional agencies have grappled with these implementation issues already and can provide insight to jails interested in taking this approach. Additionally, women in jails are fortunate to have caring administrators who are eager to adopt efforts to help meet their gender-specific needs. Individuals interested in learning more about the WRNAs and implementation of the assessments can visit the Women's Risk/Needs Project website at [www.uc.edu/womenoffenders](http://www.uc.edu/womenoffenders) or contact the Project Manager at [ashley.bauman@uc.edu](mailto:ashley.bauman@uc.edu). ■

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