



Research Snippet

Finding Their Way: Conditions for successful reintegration among women offenders

KEY WORDS: *prison, incarceration, women offenders, reintegration, community-based corrections*

What it means

The findings of this study suggest that there are several important elements of reintegration planning that need to be considered simultaneously to prepare women for release from prison : (a) providing appropriate treatment while in custody; (b) enhancing self-esteem and self-efficacy; (c) strengthening family connections; (d) providing, through parole officers, open lines of communication, transparency in expectations, and non-judgmental interaction; and (e) providing continuity of care, including assistance becoming familiar with new communities and linkages to care. A holistic approach that addresses these complex needs can enhance a woman's desire, belief and ability to make positive life changes. Those involved with release planning should be cognizant of complex needs of women offenders, notably the impact of trauma and addictions on reintegration readiness and develop therapeutic approaches that will build adaptive coping strategies in response to the powerful emotions evoked by traumatic experiences.

What we found

The complexity of the reintegration process was captured in the narratives of the women who participated in this study. We identified several interconnected themes that seemed to encompass the concept of "reintegration readiness": desire to change, self-esteem, institutional treatment, family and professional supports, and continuity of care. Reintegration readiness can be viewed as the presence of person-specific conditions (i.e., desire to change and self-esteem) and context-specific conditions (i.e., access to institutional treatment, family and professional support, and continuity of care) that support the transition of the offender from prison to the community. Addiction and past experiences of trauma can act as barriers to reintegration readiness and both were salient issues in the lives of these women.

Why we did this study

The transition from prison to the community is a challenging time for women offenders. For example, a Canadian study of women federal offenders who

completed a substance abuse program found that 41.3% of the sample (n=560) returned to custody in the first year after their release.¹ Women who come into contact with the prison system often have complex needs such as substance abuse, mental illness, low education, few employment skills, and poor social skills. The Correctional Service of Canada provides programs to address many of these needs through cognitive-behavioural based interventions, educational sessions, health services, employment training and follow-up support in the community.

The objective of this study was to outline the critical components of reintegration readiness from the perspective of women offenders.

What we did

We developed a framework to understand the experiences of women offenders as they reintegrate into their communities after a prison stay. In-depth unstructured interviews were completed with thirty-one federal women offenders with substance abuse issues who were either living in the community or had recently returned to prison. Each woman was asked to describe her experiences immediately following release.

For more information

Please e-mail the [Research Branch](#) or contact us by phone at (613) 995-3975.

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¹ Matheson, F. I., Doherty, S., & Grant, B. (2009) *Women Offender Substance Abuse Programming & Community Reintegration* (Research report R-202). Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada.

