

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

CHANGING LIVES. PROTECTING CANADIANS.

Risk Factors Related to the Initial Security Classification of Women Offenders: A Literature Review

Both gender-neutral and gender-responsive factors are related to institutional adjustment for women offenders.

Why we did this study

The security classification of offenders is a critical component of effective management within correctional institutions. Offenders' security classification level designates their living conditions, including the type of accommodation and movement allowed within the institution, as well as the programming available to them. Given its key role in the safety and security of institutions, it is important to ensure that offenders are classified as the appropriate security level, using valid tools.

To facilitate initial security classification, Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) currently uses the Custody Rating Scale (CRS) which consists of two independently scored subscales; the Institutional Adjustment (IA) subscale that assesses risks associated with institutional misconducts, and the Security Risk (SR) subscale that measures the amount of danger the offender would pose to the public upon escape. Importantly, concerns have been raised that 'gender-neutral' assessment tools, such as the CRS may not consider all the relevant factors for women offenders and could result in over (or under) classification.

What we did

The current report reviewed the literature to identify factors that should be part of the determination of the initial security classification of women offenders. Evidence for potential risk factors that could be relevant across three outcomes -- institutional adjustment, escape risk, and risk to the public in the event of an escape – was examined, as well as social history factors that could potentially be relevant for Indigenous women offenders. A comprehensive search of several databases including PSYCinfo, Criminal Justice Abstracts, Sociological abstracts, NCJRS, Government correctional agencies, Dissertations and Theses, and Google Scholar was conducted. The search was completed on July 6, 2018.

What we found

Overall, results suggested that there was evidence that several gender-neutral factors (i.e., age, criminal history, sentence length, gang membership, IQ (lower), substance misuse, and education/employment) as well as factors commonly considered gender-responsive (i.e., history of

trauma/abuse, mental health issues, relationship dysfunction, and parenting responsibilities) were related to institutional adjustment and/or escapes for women offenders.

Research in CSC has shown that Indigenous women offenders typically have poorer institutional adjustment than non-Indigenous women and were more likely to be classified in a higher level of security. Importantly, Indigenous women offenders more frequently have substance use issues, residential school experiences, have been removed from their home at a young age, and have a history of trauma or abuse than non-Indigenous women offenders. It is unclear how some of these factors related to institutional adjustment.

What it means

Several recommendations were proposed to reduce the likelihood of over-classifying women offenders' risk on their entry into institutions. These include: altering the weighting of items to reflect differential relationship of established predictors by gender and incorporating additional response options in items (to capture the unique experiences of women).

Notably, more research is needed to determine whether gender-responsive risk factors and culture specific factors for Indigenous women incrementally predict institutional outcomes over and above the contribution by gender-neutral risk factors alone. Further consideration needs to be given to the value of including items in a classification process that could raise privacy concerns and/or penalize women for their disadvantaged personal histories.

For more information

Wanamaker, K. A. (2018). *Risk Factors Related to the Initial Security Classification of Women Offenders: A Literature Review* (Research Report R-418). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

To obtain a PDF version of the full report, or for other inquiries, please e-mail the [Research Branch](#) or contact us by phone at (613) 995-3975.

You can also visit the [Research Publications](#) section for a full list of reports and one-page summaries.

