

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

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Women Offenders' Pathways to Security Threat Group Affiliation

Pathways to STG involvement were similar for all STG-affiliated women: social networks, marginalization, and childhood adversity; Indigenous women were most likely to have a history of abuse, family fragmentation and STG affiliated social networks.

Why we did this study

Previous research has found that women's pathways¹ to Security Threat Group (STG) affiliation are different when compared to men. Women join at a younger age and often become affiliated through their STG affiliated partner.² A review of the literature found that social networks, marginalization and childhood adversity³ were the three main pathways to STG affiliation.⁴ This study was undertaken to examine the specific STG pathways for federal women offenders in Canada.

What we did

All women ($N = 105$) with an STG affiliation under federal jurisdiction from 2013 to 2019 were examined;⁵ 45% were in-custody while 55% were under community supervision. Over three-quarters (78%, $n = 82$) were Indigenous.⁶

What we found

The majority of women (93%) were STG involved prior to incarceration, which was consistent across in-custody/ community status, ethnocultural groups, and STG group.

Social networks. Overall, 53% of women had STG-affiliated friends, 20% had STG-affiliated partners while 31% had STG-affiliated family members. Nearly 59% percent of Indigenous women had STG-affiliated friends and 34% had STG-affiliated family members. In comparison, 35% of non-Indigenous women had STG-affiliated friends and 17% had STG-affiliated family members. However, non-Indigenous women were more likely than Indigenous women to have STG-affiliated partners (35% vs 16%).

Marginalization. Almost one-quarter (23%) of women experienced periods of homelessness while 39% were involved in street life.⁷ Most women (91%) experienced periods of unemployment and 18% were involved in the sex trade. Indigenous women were more likely than non-Indigenous women to experience periods of unemployment (95% versus 74%). In contrast with the literature that describes the sex trade as women's main role in STGs⁸,

less than a quarter (22%) of Indigenous women and 4% of non-Indigenous women reported this involvement.

Childhood adversity. Three-quarters (72%) of women reported experiencing abuse; 92% indicated abuse prior to STG affiliation and 24% indicated abuse after STG affiliation. Indigenous women were nearly twice as likely to report experiencing abuse compared to non-Indigenous women (81% vs 44%, respectively). Most Indigenous women reported abuse prior to STG affiliation (96%) and 27% reported abuse after STG affiliation. Seventy-three percent of non-Indigenous women reported abuse prior to STG affiliation and 9% reported abuse after STG affiliation.

Also, 59% of women experienced family fragmentation and 44% experienced foster care. Over two-thirds (68%) of Indigenous women experienced family fragmentation and 54% experienced periods in foster care. Whereas 26% of non-Indigenous women experienced family fragmentation and 9% experienced time in foster care.

What it means

Social networks, marginalization factors, and childhood adversity are important pathways to STG involvement for all women offenders. However, this study suggests that certain STG pathways are more prevalent for Indigenous women than non-Indigenous women offenders, such as higher reports of abuse and family fragmentation, and the importance of STG affiliated social networks. Exploring the STG pathways for women better informs interventions and supports, especially those designed for STG disaffiliation. Future qualitative research would further inform our knowledge of women's pathways to STG affiliation.

For more information

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¹ A pathway refers to the various factors that would lead someone to STG involvement. This does not refer to the Correctional Service of Canada's Pathways initiative for Indigenous offenders.

² Sutton, T. (2017). The lives of female gang members: a review of the literature. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 37*, 142-152.

³ Childhood adversity includes history of abuse (physical, mental, emotional, sexual, or neglect), family fragmentation, and foster care experience.

⁴ Cram, S. & Farrell MacDonald, S. Pathways to security threat groups: a review of the literature (RR-21-01). Ottawa, ON: CSC.

⁵ STG affiliated women in the study will be referred to as women.

⁶ Non-Indigenous offenders ($n = 23$) include: White (12%), Black (4%), Asian (4%), and other ethnocultural groups (2%).

⁷ The offender technically has a home (i.e. family home, group home or foster care) but spends much of their time hanging out on the streets.

⁸ Sutton, 2017; Totten, M. (2009). *Aboriginal youth and violent gang involvement in Canada: quality prevention strategies*. IPC Review 3: Public Safety Canada.