

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

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Qualitative Examination of Overrides for Correctional Programming for Women Offenders

While the proportion of overrides was higher than anticipated, the reasons were consistent with policy guidelines.

Why we did this study

Effective February 5, 2018, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) changed its policy for program assignments, requiring all offenders to be referred to programs based on the Criminal Risk Index (CRI). The CRI is a tool used to assess static risk and guide offender intervention levels. A recent evaluation of Correctional Reintegration Programs (CSC, 2019) found that more than half of the women offenders who completed programming were overridden into a program, as they did not initially meet the program referral criteria.

The purpose of this study was to conduct a qualitative examination of the reasons of overrides of the CRI referral criteria for women offenders and to examine their consistency with policy guidelines regarding overrides.

What we did

Analyses were conducted with an admission dataset ($N = 709$; 34% Indigenous), which included all offenders whom were admitted to federal custody with a new warrant of committal during their first term between February 1, 2018 and December 31, 2019. The CRI scores and levels were extracted, as were basic demographic (gender, ethnicity), offender intake assessment, sentence, offence, program assignment information, and program override information.

All offenders who were identified as having an override were coded, which focused on the reasons for an override to a higher intensity program and the reasons for an override to a lower intensity program.

What we found

An examination of demographic characteristics indicated that the majority of women were serving shorter sentences and were convicted of drug-related offences. The criminogenic needs that were most salient for women offenders appeared to be those related to personal/emotional orientation, substance abuse, and associates. In addition, the majority of the study group were low (45%) to moderate (45%) criminal risk, based on the CRI.

While a large proportion of program referrals aligned with CRI scores ($n = 591$; 85%), there appeared to be higher than expected percentages of overrides from high to moderate intensity (21%) and from engagement only to moderate intensity (26%) and the extent to which varied by Indigenous ancestry, region, offence type, and sentence length. Further analyses demonstrated that of those women who completed moderate intensity programming, 20% ($n = 64$) did not initially meet the program referral criteria for moderate intensity and were overridden into the program. These results were consistent across Indigenous ancestry.

File reviews of the reasons for overrides showed that among women who were overridden from engagement only to moderate intensity, a large proportion were assessed as having a moderate to severe substance use problem and there was an established link between their substance use and their criminal behaviour. All women who were overridden from moderate to high intensity had exhibited a pattern of persistent violence where a large proportion of their current offence(s) included elements of gratuitous violence. The most frequently documented reason for an override from high to moderate intensity was the presences of significant factors that would mitigate their risk (e.g., gaps in offending, limited history of violence).

What it means

Overall, the results of this study demonstrated that the rationale of program overrides was consistent with policy guidelines. Nonetheless, the proportion of overrides was higher than anticipated, which raises potential challenges in aligning programming needs with response strategies.

For more information

Smeth, A., Derkzen, D., Cram, S., & Ridha, T. *Qualitative Examination of Overrides for Correctional Programming for Women Offenders* (Research Report R-440). Ottawa, Ontario: CSC.

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