

Women's Risk and Needs Assessment

Gender-Neutral Risk and Needs Assessment

Risk and needs assessments use an actuarial evaluation to guide decision-making at various points across the criminal justice continuum by approximating a person's likelihood of reoffending and determining what individual criminogenic needs must be addressed to reduce that likelihood. General criminogenic risk and needs assessment tools consist of questions that are designed to ascertain someone's history of criminal behavior, attitudes and personality, and life circumstances. These assessments also help inform case planning and management to ensure that individual needs are met.

Risk and needs assessments can be administered at any time during a person's contact with the criminal justice system – during the pretrial period, while on probation, after admission to a correctional facility, prior to release, and during post-release supervision. Objective risk and needs assessments have been shown to be more reliable than a professional's individual judgment.

High-quality assessments require well-trained staff to conduct the assessments, clear and periodically updated scoring guidelines, regular validation studies, and ongoing quality improvement exercises.

While the use of risk and needs assessment is now widespread in corrections, it should be noted that the current generation of these tools – not unlike the vast majority of correctional policy and practice – has been developed on predominantly male populations and then applied across the board. Many factors identified in the widely used gender-neutral risk and need assessments do have applicability to both men and women; those factors include criminal history, antisocial attitudes, financial/employment challenges, education, anti-social friends, and substance abuse. However, when applied to women, those factors need to be addressed but often occur in a different context with women than with men. For example, a woman may be considered as unemployed, while she may be the sole source of care for her children or while her anti-social acquaintance may be a partner with whom she is in an abusive relationship but who is the father of her child.

Assessing Women's Risk and Needs

In "Women's Risk Factors and New Treatments/Intervention for Addressing Them: Evidence-Based Interventions in the United States and Canada", Pat Van Voorhis, PhD wrote, "Simply put, what we don't see, we do not treat." By the end of the 1990s and well into the next decade, U.S. policymakers and practitioners were expressing a growing concern for dramatic increases in the number of women entering the U.S. corrections system. (Buell, 2011). Those studying women in correctional systems asserted that female offenders presented differences from males in types of offenses, levels of violence, and pathways to criminal justice involvement.

The pathways perspectives, research, and theory specific to race and ethnicity, women and crime, relational theory and female development, trauma and addiction theory have been foundational to the development of gender-responsive models of practice, to include women's risk and need assessments, and training and technical assistance with women in the justice systems. The content that follows provides a more detailed picture of the areas with relevance to the lives of women.

- **Victimization and Abuse:** Child abuse is proposed to be a critical starting point for the development of delinquency conduct among women throughout their lives. Adult victimization also is suggested in feminist literature to play a critical role in women's continuing criminal behavior.
- **Relationship Problems:** Prevailing models of psychotherapy for women recognize that women's identity, self-worth, and sense of empowerment are defined by the quality of relationships they have with others. Correctional scholars also have noted that many women offenders engage in relationships that facilitate their criminal behavior. They also may be involved in abusive relationships or may turn to substance abuse to cope with relationship issues. Others have suggested that women may actually avoid criminal behavior to prevent harm to their relationships. However, this may apply only to women in relationships with prosocial partners, because the same relational attachment process may explain a woman's increased criminal behavior if she is involved in relationships with antisocial individuals.
- **Mental Health:** The mental health needs of female offenders appear to differ substantially from those of male offenders. Depression, anxiety, and self-injurious behavior are more prevalent among female offenders than among male offenders. Phobic diagnoses and co-occurring diagnoses such as depression and substance abuse have been at four times the rates for women than for men. Furthermore, stress, depression, fearfulness, and suicidal thoughts/attempts have been shown to be strong predictors of women's recidivism but not of men's recidivism.
- **Substance Abuse:** Substance abuse is related to male and female offending and is assessed in most risk/needs assessment instruments. However, some have suggested that substance abuse has unique effects on women, given its high co-occurrence with other problems, such as mental illness and histories of victimization. In addition, mandatory drug sentences may have affected women's incarceration rates more than men. Though problematic for both male and female offenders, substance abuse in women likely fits one of the categories mentioned above; that is, it (a) is typically seen among male offenders but in greater frequencies among female offenders, and/or (b) affects women and men differently. The co-occurrence of substance abuse with other gender-responsive needs supports the second argument and suggests that we cannot fully address women's addictions without considering issues of mental health and trauma.
- **Self-Efficacy/Self-Confidence:** This is highly relevant to the notion of empowerment and is valued by gender-responsive and feminist scholars as a protective factor for women. Women's ability to control their lives and to achieve their goals has been cited by correctional treatment staff, researchers, and women offenders themselves as relevant to desistance from crime.
- **Poverty:** Many female offenders lead lives plagued by poverty. In fact, only 40% of women in state prisons report full-time employment prior to their arrest, and two-thirds report their highest hourly wage to be no higher than minimum wage. In large part, women's poverty is

attributable to limited educational and vocational skills, as are drug/alcohol dependence, childcare responsibilities, and illegal opportunities offering more lucrative returns.

- **Parental Issues:** Research examining stress among parents has indeed shown a connection between parental stress and crime among those female offenders who were single parents. Given that nearly 71% of women under correctional supervision have at least one child under the age of 18, and that visitations and child custody are difficult to maintain while incarcerated, parental stress may be a particularly salient issue among this population. National offender data show that state-incarcerated mothers (50.1%) are far more likely than incarcerated fathers (27.4%) to be unemployed prior to their incarceration, with more mothers (65.3%) than fathers (57.5%) having used drugs in the month prior to their offense (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). Additionally, stress associated with limited contact was related to higher levels of mental illness among incarcerated women with children. Finally, substantially more women (30.9%) than men (3.9%) were single parents living with their children prior to their incarceration (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000).

Thus, while several of the best-known risk and needs assessments are normalized on male and female offenders, they omit factors critically important to women. The movement to reduce the size and cost of prison populations has resulted in a focus on collecting data on offenders based on evidence-based practices linked with successful outcomes and lower recidivism rates. These factors are now built into some risk and needs assessment instruments that focus on women.

The Women's Risk Needs Assessment (WRNA)

As part of a long-term NIC project on Classification of Women, during 2000, information was collected from discussions on classification strategies with correctional administrators, representatives from classification and research offices throughout the 50 states, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and from focus groups of staff and of inmates. Description of current practices in use for women offenders was requested, respondents' perceptions of whether their systems "worked" for women were provided, and the extent to which agencies found the classification needs of women offenders to be different from men was explored. What were the origins of their classification system? Was it developed with women offenders in mind, or was it designed for men and applied to women? Had the systems been validated for women offenders? The results of that study can be found in *Classification of Women Offenders: A National Assessment of Current Practices 2001*.

That early work, along with the emerging research and theory relevant to women in correctional systems, set the stage for the development of Women's Risk and Needs Assessment (WRNA) scoring tools.

The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) partnered with Dr. Pat Van Voorhis at the University of Cincinnati to develop a suite of gender-responsive risk and needs assessment scoring tools to use with women offenders, known as the Women's Risk Need Assessment (WRNA). The WRNA is a set of gender-responsive actuarial risk assessment tools designed to properly account for women's risk factors, or criminogenic needs, associated with recidivism and future misconduct.

The WRNA assessment process involves a case file review, a semi-structured interview, a written survey, and a case management treatment plan all tailored to women entering various stages of the criminal justice system; three versions focus on the probation, institutional (in prison), and pre-release stages.

Overall, the WRNA has been effective at better predicting women's recidivism and other re-offending behavior, indicating that the WRNA is a valid tool for classifying adult women offenders both in institutional and community corrections settings. Specifically, items on the WRNA showed statistically significant positive correlations with measures of re-incarceration, technical violations, new arrests, and new convictions. Those items include housing safety, employment/financial, educational needs, anger/hostility, history of mental illness, depression/anxiety (symptoms), psychosis (symptoms), abuse/trauma, family conflict, relationship dysfunction, and parental stress. Assessing for and inclusion of those items can have positive outcomes, potentially decreasing rates of recidivism and failures of community supervision and improving engagement in the case management and supervision process of women. This is of benefit to both staff working with women and to the women themselves.

The WRNA has grown in popularity among practitioners for use with women offenders. Approximately 22 jurisdictions across the U.S. have implemented the WRNA. Additionally, countries outside the U.S. have begun to show interest in the WRNA, with implementation starting in Singapore, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, and Namibia. While cultural modifications to the instrument are necessary, the WRNA can begin to facilitate the consistent application of the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the "Bangkok Rules").

It should be noted that, in addition to the WRNA, other gender responsive assessment tools have been developed; there may be others, but the [SPIN-W](#) and the women's version of the [Northpointe Compass](#) are two other tools used for assessment and case planning with women.

References

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