

Women at the Nexus of Correctional and Social Policies: Implications for Recidivism Risk

Merry Morash, Deborah A. Kashy, Miriam Northcutt Bohmert,

Jennifer E. Cobbina, Sandi W. Smith

Reasons for Investigating the Relationship between Women Offenders' Access to Economic Benefit Programs and Recidivism Risk

- Current public policies are shrinking the “welfare state.” Benefits have been cut for the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (food stamps), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (welfare), and other government financial support programs.
- Other cuts to benefits are being contemplated.
- There is a chronic shortage of affordable housing in Michigan.
- Cuts to benefits increase women offenders’ risks for recidivism, and thus undermine State of Michigan efforts to promote rehabilitation and reduce prison populations.

Research Questions

1. Do fluctuations in women offenders’ receipt of needed economic assistance relate to change in their risk for recidivism?
2. Are women offenders without access to economic assistance at greater recidivism risk because of non-economic variables?

The Study

The Sample

- 305 Michigan women on probation
- 97 Michigan women on Parole
- Attrition left 379 women who participated in a second interview
- Analysis is based on 345 women who participated in both interviews and had complete data on monetary, housing, and food benefits

Interviews and Measurement

- Interviews were conducted at 2, and 8 months into supervision
- Interviews assessed study participants’ need for and receipt of three types of economic benefits:
 - o Monetary support
 - o Affordable housing
 - o Food assistance
- The interview measured financial distress with the Women’s Risk/Needs Assessment instrument (WRNA), specifically the *employment/financial* subscale.

- This scale gave a score ranging from 0 to 11 (0 = no employment/financial need, 11 = high need)
- The average initial financial need score was 5.92, with 68% of the sample being within +/- 2.37 of this average. This creates a range of 3.55 to 8.29 for 68% of the sample. Financial need was relatively high.
- The follow-up average financial need score dropped slightly to 5.73, SD = 2.51
- The initial interview also measured non-economic risks for recidivism *and* strengths that predict low recidivism using various subscales from the WRNA

Analysis of Data

- For each of the three benefits (monetary, housing, and food assistance), women were categorized as:
 - No need by the follow-up interview
 - Access to the needed benefit by follow-up
 - New unmet need by follow-up
 - Had the benefit initially but lost it by follow-up
 - Unmet need at both interviews
- Data analysis showed that there is a relationship between change in need for and receipt of economic benefits and recidivism risk.

Study Findings

For Policy

- Policies that reduce availability of economic benefits increase recidivism risk.
- Reducing public benefits as a means to restrict public spending is not empirically supported by this study. The money saved by constricting or eliminating accessibility to benefits will likely be spent on the processing and incarceration of offenders who reoffend due to unmet economic needs.
- In addition to the measurement of individual-level recidivism risk factors, social policy effects on recidivism should be assessed

For Individuals

- Unmet needs at both interviews for monetary and housing benefits characterized women with the highest scores for economic recidivism risk.
- The only women who declined in economic recidivism risk were those who reported no unmet needs at both interviews.
- Women whose financial needs increased had greater recidivism risk.

Further Research

- What allows some women, who reported no needs at both interviews, to be successful?
- Do study findings hold in other settings?
- How are economic needs, substance abuse, mental illness, and other risk factors interconnected?