Building Knowledge on Female Offenders

By Marilyn C. Moses

Editor's Note: *All opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) has been committed for nearly four decades to finding new ways to help the criminal justice system ensure fair, efficient and effective outcomes through research, evaluation and development. NIJ has encouraged researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to improve the delivery of justice and public safety as they build on the existing base of research knowledge, fill in gaps and test educated guesses. An area of continued investment has been female offenders — a topic of interest that generally has waxed and waned over the years due, in part, to the fact that females make up a relatively small portion of the criminal justice population, never exceeding 7 percent of the total.

The small size of this population, coupled with a common perception that the criminal behavior of women and the delinquent behavior of girls are not serious problems, has always presented a challenge to those seeking support for research, evaluation or program development in this arena. While it is true that females are more likely to commit minor offenses and historically have constituted a very small portion of the offender population, these facts mask a trend that is beginning to attract sustained attention.

The dramatic rise in the total number of prison and jail inmates is fairly well-known. So is the fact that the ranks of female inmates are increasing more quickly than those of their male counterparts. The pace at which females are being convicted of serious offenses is faster than that of men. Why is this so? What is the story of the women and the girls behind the numbers? What are the most effective intervention strategies? These are the questions that practitioners and policy-makers are asking researchers to answer.

During the past several years, NIJ investments in sponsored research and evaluation have brought together researchers and practitioners in the areas of law enforcement, corrections, substance abuse and violence against women. Experts from these disciplines have asked timely questions regarding female offenders, collected and analyzed data, and advocated for its use to inform criminal justice policy and practice at all levels of government, as well as nonprofit and for-profit agencies working with this segment of offenders.

In the substance abuse arena, NIJ's Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) program has been a long-standing and well-recognized research effort. The program tracks trends in the prevalence and types of drug use among booked arrestees in 35 jurisdictions. ADAM collects data on 10 drugs (including cocaine, opiates, methamphetamine and marijuana) and is the only national drug data program to report trends based on drug tests.

ADAM data play an important role in assembling the national picture of drug abuse in the arrestee population. The data have been a central component in studying the links between drug use and crime. The data provided by ADAM allow analysts and policy-makers to view trends as they develop, potentially allowing for earlier intervention against problems.

In 1998 (the latest year for which data are available), ADAM conducted interviews with and drug tests for more than 30,000 recent arrestees in 35 metropolitan areas. A total of 6,700 adult females and 434 juvenile females participated in the program that year. Data on these female offenders can be obtained from various NIJ publications or from the agency Web site www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/.

Beyond ADAM, NIJ and its partnering agency, the Corrections Program Office, have sponsored a number of other investigatory efforts involving female offenders and substance abuse (see sidebar on page 121). Two evaluations of residential substance abuse programs, specifically focused on women offenders, have been funded at the Dwight Corrections Center in Dwight, Ill., and throughout the state of Wisconsin. Another researcher is examining gender-appropriate corrections-based treatment.

Law enforcement and corrections officials, as well as policy-makers, have expressed keen interest in juvenile offenders and transnational victimization of women and children, as well as understanding the link between violence experienced by women and subsequent involvement in criminal activity. A number of research projects are under way in these areas (see sidebar). Further exploration of the participation of girls in gangs is being conducted in Cleveland and Columbus, Ohio. Understanding how communities and families contribute to the delinquent behavior and the expression of depressive symptoms in girls is the focus of another research endeavor.

Finally, work also is being conducted to identify effective correctional programs and re-entry strategies for female offenders (see sidebar). This information, along with what is learned about the psychopathy of female offenders who enter the system, what is driving the increase in these females, and how these data may inform the development of effective in-prison and re-entry programs for women, is of critical importance to corrections officials.

NIJ is characterized by ongoing growth, new collaborations and continued incremental advances in our understanding of crime and justice issues. The inventory of supported research is a testament to new and productive relationships between researchers and practitioners taking hold everywhere. The institute will continue its support of independent and high-quality research and translating research investments into useful knowledge for our customers in the field who are struggling with various correctional management and program design issues unique to the female offender.

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