

'What Works' for women who offend: A service user's perspective. Exploring the synthesis between what women want and what women get

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Abstract

The aim of this project was to explore the relationship between what women in the criminal justice system want and need to desist from further offending, and what criminal justice and other associated agencies provide. A review of the literature exploring these issues, together with the information generated from the women's accounts of their experiences, form the evidence contained in the full report.

Recommendations

- Opportunities should be explored for diverting those women identified as low risk and high need offenders from the CJS to other agencies better placed to address their offending. This will require available provision for pre-court assessors to propose, and importantly the support and confidence of the courts and sentencers in such disposals.
- The credibility, availability and visibility of voluntary sector services for women who offend should be developed, working to evidenced principles and approaches. This would be achieved through wider funding of the of delivery Women's Projects, including planned evaluation and endorsement.
- When developing services for women who offend both within and external to the criminal justice system, agencies should engage with and include the views of service users.
- The access of women offenders to available services and resources within the voluntary sector should be increased by recruiting other service users to act as peer advocates. This may include utilising these individuals to make credible links between statutory and voluntary sector agencies.
- Innovative partnerships between statutory and voluntary sector agencies that share the wider goal of addressing women's offending should be encouraged, whilst recognising the benefits of the voluntary sector retaining its autonomy and unique approach.

Findings

- The findings from literature and the service users' perspectives illustrate that many women who offend have multiple needs.
- The research found that, in many cases it is crucial to acknowledge the importance and subsequent impact of women's roles and experiences in the domestic sphere and wider society, such as parenting, care giving or in personal relationships, on their choices to offend.
- A central issue for women in the criminal justice system is their accommodation. Women often report finding difficulties when attempting to access and retain a stable and affordable living situation.
- The lack of 'legitimate' earning opportunities for women who go on to commit acquisitive offences is often underpinned by a number of social or personal factors such as a lack of skills and employment history, parenting responsibilities and wider issues of self-efficacy. These real and perceived obstacles culminate to prevent women being able to envisage or realise their potential in the wider work community.
- The project showed that, if agencies are to successfully enable women to access services — the practical issues faced by them as a result of their roles and experiences must first be addressed, for example providing childcare or assisting with safe transport. For some women these issues may also be emotional and require other responses, such as providing a women only environment.
- Where a woman's offending is associated to drug use or mental health problems it is crucial to acknowledge the underlying issues which influence the onset and continuation of these issues. There is substantial evidence illustrating the linkages between drug use and mental health problems and histories of neglect and abuse.
- The research confirmed that women are currently 'shoe horned' into a system which has been designed in response to male offending.
- The approach to delivering services, coupled with women's commonly negative experiences of social services and criminal justice agencies, means women who offend are often difficult to engage and distrustful of statutory services offering 'help'.