

# Female offenders in a rural environment: Access to community support agencies

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## Abstract

The key question raised by this research is *'to what extent does living in a rural area impact on the successful resettlement of female offenders and the specific disadvantages that they face'*. The research examines how aspects of rural crime may differ from urban crime, and the particular difficulties female offenders in a rural environment face when complying with a court order or prison licence. The main focus of the research is the availability and accessibility

of community based partnerships and agencies in rural areas.

The research is based on interviews with eighteen women who were interviewed in the probation office where they reported – five in Carlisle, eight in Barrow-in-Furness, four in Whitehaven and one in Workington. Key-workers from various agencies were also interviewed and the problems of delivering a service to offenders in rural areas discussed.

## Findings

- All the women had positive experiences of using agencies. Without exception, the interviewees reported making progress since having first attended the agencies and also having a good relationship with their key workers.
- All but two of the women interviewed were nervous about attending their first appointment at an agency and one female described herself as 'very worried'
- Although all the women valued help from various agencies, there were obstacles to attending. Distance, train times and travel arrangements were a significant challenge for those living in a rural environment.
- Female offenders in rural areas have similar needs as those in the towns or cities but are disadvantaged in comparison. Specifically:
  - ✓ continuity and stability of contact meetings with key workers from various agencies is difficult to sustain because agencies have difficulties in finding suitable accommodation which would cater for service users living in remote areas;
  - ✓ those attending accredited programmes have further to travel and the time taken to complete the journeys make attendance more onerous and compliance more difficult;
  - ✓ issues of confidentiality and familiarity are more prominent than in the relative anonymity of an urban environment. Both parties may have to be prepared for potential social contact and how to deal with it;
  - ✓ attending a drug and alcohol agency may expose women to other service users that are known to them. The lack of anonymity is a disincentive to attend because the females fear stigma and being judged in a small community;
  - ✓ victims of domestic abuse are doubly disadvantaged. They are psychologically damaged because of the abuse they receive and they are geographically isolated because of the difficulty in accessing emergency services and specialist agencies.

## Recommendations

- There should be a single venue that offers an outreach programme (a one-stop shop) which develops a service that responds to the specific needs of females who live in remote areas. This it would take as its model the Together Women Project in Salford, extending it to provide 'a 'virtual' one-stop-shop, with outreach workers going out to engage with women, assess needs and coordinate access to services' as proposed by Baroness Corston.
- The service to women should be delivered by women. This is not to undermine the value of appropriate and positive male role models, but to offer women the opportunity to increase self-confidence, make their own choices and decisions and develop supportive friendships.
- Women who receive custodial sentences for non-violent offences should not be imprisoned hundreds of miles from home but contained in small residential units where they are able to access services from the outreach programme.