Maximum-security Female and Male Federal Offenders : A Comparison

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Executive Summary

Institutional classification involves a process by which offenders are designated as either 'minimum-', 'medium-', or 'maximum-security' and housed accordingly. The major aim of this procedure is to provide

the safest and least restrictive environment possible. Federally-sentenced female offenders are to be classified and housed in environments that are commensurate with their assigned security designation. Some argue that the 'maximum-security' designation for women is inequitable in that it over-estimates their risk and imposes unnecessary restrictions. This study examined this issue through a comparison of maximum-security female offenders to their maximum-security male counterparts. More specifically, groups were compared across a number (over 200) of variables associated with risk (criminal history background), criminogenic need, and suicide potential.

Results demonstrated that current classification strategies appropriately target offenders who are high-risk/high-need for the 'maximum-security' designation. Analyses revealed few statistically significant between-gender differences on risk and need variables. Global need level ratings for six target areas (employment, associates, substance abuse, community functioning, personal/emotional orientation, attitude) were found to be non-discriminating. For the marital/family domain, maximum-security female offenders were rated as being more needy than their male counterparts.

Examination of individual need domain indicators revealed that female offenders were especially needy in the areas of substance abuse and community functioning. Indeed, all discriminating substance abuse indicators showed more problems amongst the maximum-security female offenders. In the area of personal/emotional orientation, maximum-security male offenders had more needs in terms of cognitive skills, and women had more difficulties with mental health.

The most significant and robust differences were found in the area of suicide potential: federally-sentenced women are clearly at higher risk for self-injury and suicide. Results showing that the majority of maximum-security women have previous suicide attempts are suggestive of maladaptive coping strategies by this particular group. This raises awareness about the case characteristics of female offenders placed in maximum-security and suggests tailoring intervention strategies to meet their unique needs.

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Introduction

Formerly, there existed only one federal prison for women in Canada. Recently, however, a government decision to construct five new federal prisons for women offenders has been realized. Accordingly, security classification for women has become a primary concern.

In federal corrections, the maximum-security designation is reserved for high risk/ violent offenders. It has been noted elsewhere that "women's violence has been framed largely as a response to an abusive situation or past abusive experiences" (Shaw & Dubois, 1995, p.5). Some arguments thus assert that security/ custody designations for women seem, both traditionally and currently, inappropriately high. The ramifications of this are important, as security and custody designations affect housing, access to programs, and levels of privilege.

Luciani, Motiuk, and Nafekh (1996) noted that "[a]ccurate inmate classification is critical to the effective management of prisons and prison populations, and to meeting Correctional Service of Canada's legislative and policy mandates" (p. ii). It is therefore paramount to insure that institutional security designations are determined equitably, and that they reflect the risk and needs profiles of the offenders so-classified.

Methodology and Sample

The present investigation compared female offenders placed in maximum security to their male counterparts on the following: risk (security and escape), criminogenic need, and suicide potential. For the purpose of this study, Correctional Service of Canada's automated database (Offender Management System; OMS) was used, and all available data for federally sentenced female offenders was extracted.

The extraction date was January 14, 1997, and partial data was available for 315 women. Subsequently, data for a random sample of federally sentenced men ($\underline{n}$ = 315) was extracted for comparison. Through OMS, the primary source of information for comparison was data derived from the Offender Intake Assessment (OIA). Briefly, OIA consists of two core components: Criminal Risk Assessment (CRA), and Case Needs Identification and Analysis (CNIA). In addition, a suicide risk potential with nine indicators is included in OIA. These components will be described in more detail later.

Security level at admission was available for 292 men and 212 women. Of those, 37 (17%) of the women and 54 (19%) of the men were designated as maximum-security. Not surprisingly, statistical analyses revealed significant differences in security level, with female offenders at lower levels of security than their male counterparts. Representation of security level by gender is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Percentage Distribution of Current Security Level by Gender

Security Level	Male offenders	Female offenders

Minimum	42	*14%*	72	*34%*
Medium	196	*67%*	103	*49%*
Maximum	54	*19%*	37	*17%*
TOTAL	292		212	

Note: p< .001

Results

A series of statistical analyses focused on comparing female offenders to their maximum-security male counterparts. Specifically, groups were compared on age and race, criminal history and security risk, need domains and indicators, and suicide risk potential. While demographic information was available for all of these individuals, OIA data was only available for 24 and 23 of the maximum-security women and men, respectively. Results are presented in the following sections.

Demographic Information

The maximum-security women were significantly younger than their male counterparts. The women ranged in age from 21 to 45, with a mean of 28.7. The age range for maximum-security men was greater, at 18 to 55, with a mean of 32.1. Female offenders in maximum-security were more likely to be Aboriginal. Specifically, while only 8 (14.8%) of the maximum-security men were Aboriginal, this was the case for 15 (40.5%) of the maximum-security women. Statistical analyses confirmed that this difference in Aboriginal status is highly significant (p<.01).

Criminal Risk Assessment

The Criminal Risk Assessment component of OIA is based primarily on the criminal history record and provides specific information pertaining to past and current offences. Additionally, any other pertinent details regarding specific risk factors are included in the criminal profile report. Based on these data, the OIA provides an overall risk rating for each offender.

Overall risk rating was available for all maximum-security males, and 35 of the 37 females. As expected, none of the maximum-security offenders were designated through OIA as 'low risk' at intake. Twenty-seven (77%) of the women were designated as 'high risk', and the remainder (23%) were designated as 'medium risk'. Similarly, for the men, 81% and 19% were designated as 'high-' and 'medium-risk', respectively.

Analyses revealed no significant differences on individual criminal history risk variables, with the

exception of 'sex offence history'. More specifically, while 22% of the men have an official sex offence history, this was true for none of the women. In general, maximum-security offenders started their criminal careers at an early age, with 50% of the men and 54% of the women having had previous youth court experience. Moreover, over 75% of both men and women in maximum-security had a previous history in adult court. Results of these analyses are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Selected Criminal History Background Indicators of Male and Female Maximum-security Offenders

	Male (n=23)	Female (n=24)
Previous Youth Court	*50%*	*54%*
Community Supervision	32%	41%
Open Custody	32%	39%
Secure Custody	32%	39%
Previous Adult Court	*78%*	*79%*
Community Supervision	70%	71%
Provincial Terms	65%	67%
Federal Terms	43%	29%
Total (Youth and/or Adult)	*91%*	*87%*
Previous:		

Segregation (disciplinary)	45%	48%
Escape/UAL	39%	29%
Failure on Conditional Release	39%	38%
< 6 Mo. Since Last Incarceration	46%	17%
Sex Offence History (includes current) *	22%	0%

Note: *p< .05

About one-quarter (24%) of the women and 17% of the men in maximum-security were incarcerated for a homicide. Another nine percent of the men and (none of the women) in maximum-security were serving sentences for assault. Between-group differences in homicide and assault offences is not significant. However, surprisingly, 19 (51%) of the women and only 12 (22%) of the men were convicted for robbery: this difference is statistically significant. This is exceptionally noteworthy in light of the fact that robbery is a violent offence, motivated by material gain.

Suicide Risk Potential

Maximum-security offenders were compared for gender differences in the nine indicators of suicide potential. Analyses revealed significant differences in six of those, and in each case, the women were deemed at higher risk than their male counterparts. The most striking finding was that 71% of the maximum-security women had previously attempted suicide, compared with only 21% of the maximum-security men. Moreover, one quarter of the maximum-security women expressed suicide intent at intake: this was not a problem for any of the men. Accordingly, 35% of the women, and only four percent of the men showed signs of depression. Three other indicators, 'recent psychological/psychiatric intervention', 'recent loss of relationship or death of close relative', and 'excessively worried about legal situation' evidenced significant between-gender differences, with proportionately more women exhibiting problems.

Case Need Identification and Analysis

The CNIA component of OIA involves the identification of the offender's criminogenic needs. More specifically, it considers a wide variety of case-specific aspects of the offender's personality and life situation, and data are clustered into seven target domains, with multiple indicators for each: employment (35 indicators), marital/family (31 indicators), associates/social interaction (11 indicators), substance abuse (29 indicators), community functioning (21 indicators), personal/emotional orientation (46

indicators), and attitude (24 indicators). Using CNIA, offenders are rated on each target domain along a four-point continuum. Classifications reflect the degree of need, ranging from "asset to community adjustment" (not applicable to substance abuse and personal/emotional orientation) to "no need for improvement", to "some need for improvement", to significant need for improvement".

For the present investigation, scores in each of the seven need domains were dichotomized to indicate presence or absence of need for maximum-security offenders. These data were available for all (54) male and (37) female offenders in the study. Overall, results indicate that the majority of maximum-security offenders have difficulties in every need domain. The employment domain was particularly problematic for both groups, with about 97% of women and 91% of men exhibiting problems. The only need area where significant differences were found was in the marital/family domain, with females showing more difficulty than their male counterparts. Results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Identified Needs of Male and Female Maximum-security Offenders at Admission

Type of Need	Male (n = 54)	Female (n = 37)
Employment	90.7%	97.2%
Marital/Family *	79.6%	94.4%
Associates	87.0%	86.1%
Substance Abuse	87.0%	86.1%
Community Functioning	81.5%	94.4%
Personal/Emotional	96.3%	97.2%
Attitude	83.3%	75.0%

Note: *p< .05

Although overall need levels for each domain were available for the entire sample, information regarding the individual indicators (for each domain) was only available for 24 women and 23 men in maximum-security. Between-groups comparisons of the individual indicators for each need area yielded a number of interesting results.

Few differences were noted in the area of employment, perhaps due to the high problem base rates for both groups. Of the 34 need indicators, individual analyses revealed significant differences in only five of them. The most notable difference was in the item 'dissatisfied with skill area/trade/profession', affecting 83% of women, and only 36% of the men ($p<.001$). In this domain, women were also more likely to have insufficient salaries than men (36% vs. 9%, respectively), and to find learning difficult (58% vs. 24%, respectively). Despite this, it noteworthy that men were significantly more likely than women to have difficulty meeting workload requirements (17% vs. 0%), and to have been laid off from work (39% vs. 13%).

Three of the individual marital/family indicators showed the women to have more problems in this area. The largest difference, not surprisingly, was in the area of spousal abuse, where 65% (compared with only 13% of men) of the maximum-security women reported past victimization. Moreover, almost 70% of the female sample were noted to have communication problems in relationships, compared with only 30% of the men. Finally, women were significantly more likely than men to have had problems with family relationships in their childhood (55% and 18%, respectively).

In the area of associates/social interaction, the maximum-security women were significantly more likely to have difficulty with being victimized in social relations: this was problematic for almost half (48%) of the women, and 13% of the men. In contrast, significantly more men (41%) could be described as predatory in their relationships, compared to only 9% of the women. One last indicator in this area that showed significant between-gender differences was: 'has been affiliated with a gang', which was endorsed for 32% of the men, and only 8% of the women.

Despite the fact that there was no overall difference noted in the area of substance abuse, indicator analyses yielded significant differences in ten of the 29 indicators. Moreover, in *every case* the maximum-security women were significantly more needy than their male counterparts. Perusal of significant indicators also showed that more of the differences emerged in the area of drug use than alcohol use. For instance, women were significantly more likely to have began using drugs at an early age, and to use drugs to relieve stress. Additionally, their drug use was more likely to cause problems in other areas of their lives, such as: employment, marital/family relationships, social relations, and health. Indeed, a full 61% of maximum-security women had previously participated in substance abuse treatment, compared with only 22% of the men.

In general, maximum-security offenders were noted to have many problems in the area of community functioning. Almost all (96%) of the women and 68% of the men had used social assistance at some point prior to their incarceration. Significant between-gender differences were noted in leisure activities, where men were less likely than women to have hobbies, or to participate in organized activities. In contrast, the women had more financial and accommodation problems. More specifically, 71% of the women (compared with 39% of the men) had unstable accommodation, and over 90% had no credit or collateral. These differences were also statistically significant.

Examination of the individual indicators in the area of personal/emotional orientation for maximum-

security offenders yielded similar findings to the overall between-gender comparisons discussed earlier. More specifically, men showed significantly more problems in the areas of self-concept and cognition, and women evidenced more difficulties in areas of mental health and interventions. Men had deficiencies in physical prowess, ethnicity, and gang affiliations. Moreover, they were more often characterized as: unable to recognize problem areas, showing disregard for others, socially unaware, incapable of understanding the feelings of others, narrow and rigid thinkers, and non-reflective. Women, on the other hand, showed more assertion problems, and were more often prescribed medication (past and currently), and received more outpatient services. Finally, women were significantly more likely to be currently (i.e., at intake) involved with mental health programming.

In regards to attitude, only two of the specific indicators yielded significant between-gender differences. In both cases, the maximum-security men evidenced higher need than their female counterparts. Seventeen percent of the men, but none of the women, viewed marital/family relations as having no value. Likewise, 18% of the men and none of the women had negative attitudes towards the elderly.

Risk/Need Levels

At admission, global ratings of case needs (either 'low', 'medium', or 'high') are obtained for each offender. As with the criminal risk assessment (global risk level), results showed that none of the maximum security offenders were designated as 'low' on overall need. Indeed, a full 86% of the women, and 83% of the men were designated as 'high' need, with the remainder designated as 'medium' need.

Offender Intake Assessment considers a composite of risk and need for a variety of criteria such as institutional placement, correctional management and supervision. Table 4 provides a percentage distribution of risk/need levels of the men and women offenders in this sample.

Table 4

Percentage Distribution of Risk/Need Levels for Maximum-security Offenders

	Male offenders		**Female offenders**	
RISK/NEED LEVEL:	(54)	%	(35)	%

Medium-risk/Medium-need	5	9.3%	4	11.4%
Medium-risk/High-need	5	9.3%	4	11.4%
Sub-total	*10*	*18.6%*	*8*	*22.8%*
High-risk/Medium-need	4	7.4%	1	2.9%
High-risk/High-need	40	74.1%	26	74.3%
Sub-total	*44*	*81.5%*	*27*	*77.2%*

Conclusions

The present investigation has sought to explore between-gender differences on a variety of criteria at intake: risk (security and escape), suicide potential, and criminogenic need. Comparisons focused on maximum-security offenders, using all data for women that was available through OIA. A random sample of maximum-security male offenders was obtained for between-groups analyses.

Narrowing the focus to only maximum-security offenders resulted in some minor logistical problems. First the extremely high proportion of these offenders with various needs (high endorsement of indicators) results in a lower probability of finding statistical significance in between-groups comparisons. Secondly, the findings regarding the individual indicators should necessarily be interpreted with caution, as cell sizes for both groups are very small.

Notwithstanding that, analyses demonstrated that maximum-security women are equally high-risk, and have as many, or more needs than their male counterparts. The Criminal Risk Assessment component of OIA revealed no between-gender differences in criminal history variables, except for sex offence history. Overall need levels for the seven target areas were similarly non-discriminating, except for the marital/family domain where women were more needy than their male counterparts.

Examination of the individual needs indicators revealed that the women were also especially needy in the areas of substance abuse and community functioning. In fact, all discriminating substance abuse indicators showed more problems amongst the women. Pertaining to personal/emotional orientation, men had more needs in terms of cognitive components, and women had more problems with mental health/ interventions.

Finally, the between-gender differences in suicide potential were robust: women are clearly at higher risk for suicide/ self harm. The importance of this finding is highlighted by previous research that has linked self-injury to recidivism and to violent recidivism with female offenders (Bonta, Pang, & Wallace-

Capretta, 1990; Blanchette & Motiuk, 1995).

Taken together, these preliminary results unquestionably indicate that, as a group, maximum-security offenders are both high-risk and high-need. For women, needs are especially concentrated in the areas of marital/family relationships, and substance (especially drug) abuse. Moreover, the fact that the majority of maximum-security women have previous suicide attempts is indicative of maladaptive coping by this particular group. More specifically, it is suggested that problematic marital/family relationships may be perpetuating increased substance abuse and self-injury amongst high-risk women offenders.

As more data regarding OIA becomes available through the Offender Management System, it is hoped that these findings may be replicated in prospective research. The present investigation has provided preliminary information pertaining to the high risk/ high need population of maximum-security offenders, particularly women offenders. Should these results be confirmed in the future, the data may be used to further explain the exact nature of between-gender differences, and to further tailor treatment strategies to the particular risk/need profile of the offenders for which they are designed.

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