



Improving Access to Services for Female Offenders Returning to the Community

by Marie Garcia with Nancy Ritter

An evaluation of re-entry services for female offenders shows that increasing access can lead to modest improvements in key areas.

In a single decade — 1999 to 2009 — the number of adult women incarcerated in U.S. prisons grew by 25 percent. Adult women now make up about 7 percent of the total inmate population, and they face many challenges upon release from prison. For example, women experience barriers to obtaining housing, greater difficulty in obtaining and sustaining employment, less family support, and more substance abuse than men.¹ The programming offered to women while incarcerated, however, is usually modeled after the programs for male prisoners.

As a group, women are often overlooked with regard to re-entry programming, and results from the recent evaluation of the Serious and

Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) showed that adult females reported a significantly higher need for services than men. This finding highlights a thread running through the re-entry literature that suggests a disconnect between the services individuals *need* to facilitate a successful re-entry into their community and the services they *receive*.

Through SVORI, funding was provided to state and local jurisdictions to develop re-entry strategies for offenders returning to their communities. (See sidebar, “The Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative: The Basics.”) NIJ funded a multi-year, multisite evaluation of SVORI to examine the effect its programs had on access to re-entry services



and programs and on housing, education, employment and criminal behavior. This evaluation, one of the largest NIJ-funded evaluations to date, included a sample of 357 adult females in 11 states who were returning to their communities.² These women are the focus of this article.

Forty-three percent of the adult female sample (153 women) were included in the experimental group and received services funded by SVORI (“SVORI women”); 57 percent of the sample (204 women) did not receive SVORI services and instead received “treatment

as usual” from their institutions (“non-SVORI women”). SVORI programming varied by the services provided and the approach each institution took to implementation³

The SVORI and non-SVORI women were interviewed at four intervals: at 30 days pre-release and at three, nine and 15 months post-release.

When measuring need, researchers “bundled” services into five categories:

1. Services to help with the transition from prison to the community

2. Health care services (including substance abuse and mental health)
3. Employment, education and life-skills services
4. Intimate partner violence-related services
5. Child-related services

Women in both groups indicated that their needs were highest in the third category, employment, education and life skills (79 percent), and the first category, transition services (73 percent).

The Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative: The Basics

SVORI was an unprecedented national response to the challenges of prisoner re-entry.¹ Funded by the U.S. Departments of Justice, Labor, Education, Housing and Urban Development, and Health and Human Services, SVORI provided \$100 million in funding to improve the criminal justice, employment, education, health and housing outcomes for people returning to the community after prison.

Beginning in 2003, 69 agencies in the U.S. received \$500,000-\$2 million over a three-year period. There was little federal guidance for the development of re-entry programs, although the agencies had to offer a three-phase continuum of services beginning during incarceration, intensifying just before release and during the first few months post-release, and continuing for several years. Therefore, the 89 programs developed under SVORI varied

considerably in approach, services provided and target populations.

NIJ funded RTI International and the Urban Institute to evaluate the impact of SVORI. The evaluation assessed:

- Whether SVORI programs, compared with “treatment as usual,” increased prisoners’ access to pre-release services.
- Whether SVORI participants continued to receive more services than non-SVORI participants upon release.
- Whether SVORI participants experienced better outcomes than non-SVORI participants on measures of employment, education,

housing, relationships, substance abuse, physical and mental health, and recidivism.

The multi-year, multisite evaluation included an implementation assessment, impact evaluation and economic analysis. The final report was published in 2009 in six volumes, all of which are available at the National Criminal Justice Reference Service website, <http://www.ncjrs.gov>.

In fiscal year 2010, NIJ awarded \$401,670 to RTI to reexamine data collected in the original SVORI evaluation and supplemental data. The project will attempt to determine what worked and for whom. Findings are expected in 2012.

Note

1. Lattimore, Pamela K., and Christy A. Visher, “The Multi-site Evaluation of SVORI: Summary and Synthesis,” Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 2004-RE-CX-0002, April 2010, NCJ 230421, available at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/230421.pdf>.

During the pre-release interviews, the women reported that their greatest employment, education and life-skills needs were education (95 percent), employment (83 percent) and job training (83 percent). Their reported greatest transition service needs were public health insurance (91 percent), financial assistance (87 percent), a mentor (83 percent) and obtaining a driver's license (79 percent).

Because of their high level of need, female offenders are likely to encounter tremendous obstacles when they re-enter the community after serving time in prison. "The women in the SVORI study had numerous physical and mental health problems, extensive substance abuse histories, significant criminal histories, serious exposure to drug or criminally involved family members and peers, and substantial housing challenges," said Pamela K. Lattimore, a nationally recognized expert on prison re-entry and one of the principal investigators for NIJ's SVORI evaluation.

Lattimore, a principal scientist with RTI International, worked with co-principal investigator Christy A. Visher, professor at the University of Delaware and former principal research associate with the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute, on the evaluation.

Outcomes for SVORI Women and Non-SVORI Women

Findings regarding the impact of the additional SVORI services on women's outcomes were mixed. The SVORI women showed significant improvement in the areas of employment and substance use compared with non-SVORI women. There were no significant differences, however, in housing, family and peer relationships, physical and mental health, and recidivism.

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Employment

At 15 months post-release, SVORI women were more likely than non-SVORI women to report they were supporting themselves with a job, receiving formal pay, and experiencing stable employment.

The researchers believe the impact of SVORI services on employment outcomes was not surprising because employment was the most common programmatic focus among all the SVORI programs. What was somewhat surprising was that, for many dimensions of employment, these differences were not statistically significant until 15 months post-release.

"This pattern may have emerged because, although employment outcomes steadily increased for the SVORI group, it dropped off for the non-SVORI group at the 15-month post-release point," Lattimore said. "Overall, we believe that the SVORI programs were effective in improving employment outcomes for the women."

Substance Use

Approximately two-thirds of the women in the SVORI study had used illicit drugs during the 30 days before incarceration. More than half (55 percent) reported they had received

professional treatment for a drug or alcohol problem at some point in their lives. On average, the women reported they had been in a treatment program three times. At the time of their pre-release interview, 65 percent of the women reported needing substance abuse treatment.

The SVORI women received a higher level of treatment services for substance abuse than non-SVORI women. At three and 15 months post-release, the SVORI women were significantly less likely to have used drugs during the post-release period and during the 30 days prior to assessment than the non-SVORI women. This finding suggests that consistent monitoring of drug use is an important tool to provide during post-release services because holding women accountable may help them keep clean longer.

It is important to note, however, that in both groups, substance use increased the longer the women were out of prison.

"These findings are particularly important because of the extensive substance abuse histories reported by the women," Lattimore said. "For all of the women we studied — the SVORI participants and those in the control group — abstinence from substance use became increasingly more difficult throughout the post-release follow-up period."

Although the SVORI programs positively influenced women's employment and substance use outcomes, women who received SVORI services did not do better than their non-SVORI counterparts in the areas of:

- Housing (which gradually improved over the study period for all women)

The Second Chance Act and Other Ongoing NIJ Research Projects

The Second Chance Act (SCA) was signed into law in 2008. The SCA authorizes federal agencies to award grants to state and local agencies and nonprofit organizations to provide employment assistance, substance abuse treatment, housing, family programming, mentoring, victims support and other services to people returning to the community from prison or jail. The goals of the SCA are to increase re-entry programming and improve outcomes for offenders returning to their families and communities. (For more information about the SCA, visit the National Reentry Resource Center at <http://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org>.)

The SCA directs NIJ to evaluate the effectiveness of demonstration projects funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). In fiscal year 2010, NIJ awarded \$10 million for re-entry-related research:

- Evaluation of the BJA Second Chance Act Adult Demonstration Projects**
 Social Policy Research Associates will perform a \$3 million, multi-year, multi-site evaluation of seven SCA adult demonstration sites. The evaluation will include impact, process, outcome and cost assessments of re-entry services. It also will include an implementation study of three adult demonstration sites that are not included in the full-scale evaluation.

- Evaluation of the BJA Reentry Courts Program**

Northwest Professional Consortium, Inc., is performing a \$3 million, 42-month, multisite evaluation of BJA's Reentry Courts Program. A process evaluation will document and compare program models and implementation. An impact evaluation will examine re-arrests, reconvictions, violations and returns to incarceration. Cost-benefit analyses will look at the cost to the public of program interventions versus "business as usual."

- Evaluation of the Multisite Demonstration Field Experiment: What Works in Reentry Research**

In an effort to provide rigorous evidence of what works in re-entry, NIJ awarded \$3 million to MDRC to conduct tests of promising re-entry interventions, strategies or programs. Re-entering offenders will be randomly assigned to

receive the experimental treatment or to receive "business as usual" re-entry services (or some other clearly defined control treatment).

NIJ has also given additional funding for Alfred Blumstein and Kiminori Nakamura's research on hiring ex-offenders. The \$247,000 project continues their previous research into calculations of "redemption time," the amount of time that an individual with an arrest record has stayed "clean" (i.e., no additional arrests) and could be considered "redeemed" with respect to his or her criminal record. The researchers are testing the robustness of the previous findings, and looking at out-of-state arrests and racial differences. The work is increasingly relevant because of the large number of people who are handicapped in finding employment by stale criminal records.



- Family and peer relationships (which remained relatively stable throughout the study period for all women)
- Physical health and mental health (which remained relatively stable for all women)

“The bottom line,” Visher said, “was that, although the women who received SVORI services showed modest improvements in several key areas — particularly employment and drug use — their high level of need far outweighed the services they received.”

Implications for Policy and Practice

Findings from the SVORI evaluation suggest the provision and delivery of pre- and post-release services is a difficult task. The evaluation results can be used by corrections professionals and service providers to improve evidence-based planning and service delivery.

Overall, both SVORI and non-SVORI women faced challenges including mental and physical health problems, extensive family responsibilities, and lack of employment experience.

“Appropriate identification of needs, treatment planning and follow-up may be particularly important for women,” Lattimore noted, adding that the coordination of a range of services should be considered one of the guiding principles when developing strategies for female offenders.

The researchers also observed some temporal patterns that may have implications for supervision and service delivery. Some outcomes, such as substance use, criminal behavior and recidivism, worsened over time for both SVORI and non-SVORI

women. For other outcomes, however, improvements over time seem to be the predominant pattern.

“For example, women’s housing situation, employment, resumption of primary care responsibility for their children and community involvement appear to gradually improve over time,” Visher said. “This could indicate that many women find their footing in these dimensions.”

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The SVORI findings also could be used to help identify the appropriate point at which to intervene to address particular needs. The period around nine months post-release appears to be a particularly challenging time for women.

Both self-reported drug use and housing challenges — including homelessness — were higher at nine months post-release than at three months or 15 months.

The SVORI program was successful in delivering important re-entry services to women returning to their communities. SVORI women received a substantially higher level of overall services than non-SVORI women. Indeed, where services were provided, the women generally did better, such as in employment and substance use.

In the areas of housing, family and peer relationships, and physical and mental health, however, women enrolled in SVORI and women receiving “treatment as usual” had similar outcomes.

“Frankly, the fact that the SVORI women and those in the control group had similar outcomes in these areas did not surprise us, because we did not have a significant difference in the level of services to both groups, such as assistance in finding a place to live, medical treatment, domestic violence services and child services,” Visher said.

The low level of services provided under SVORI that might have improved re-entry outcomes related to housing, relationships, and mental and physical health was confirmed by the SVORI directors, who said that such services were not a major focus of the programs. “This is unfortunate,” said Visher, “given the emphasis that previous research has placed on the importance of familial relationships in the re-entry process — and the high levels of both physical and mental health problems reported by returning women.”

Where to Go From Here

For policymakers and practitioners who are faced with doing more with the same or less in the crucial area of offender re-entry, there is a need to understand why, in looking at findings as a whole, there were only significant differences between the 153 women who received SVORI services and the 204 women who did not in two service areas — employment and substance abuse. The delivery of services for SVORI women, although greater overall, failed to match their level of need with respect to mental and physical health problems, family

responsibilities, and lack of work experience.

Mixed findings, however, do not equate to no findings, nor do they equate to failure. If there is one crucial “take-away” from the NIJ evaluation of SVORI, it is that women returning to the community after serving time in prison have extremely high levels of need. In addition, although these needs declined over time, levels of unmet need remained high even at 15 months.

“It is important that practitioners and policymakers keep this in mind when planning and coordinating

re-entry services,” Lattimore said. “On the basis of the limited research on female offenders — and the even more limited evaluations of re-entry programs — the factors that appear most important for the successful re-entry of women include establishing suitable housing, finding gainful employment, and reuniting with children and family.”

In addition, she added, women’s re-entry programs need to emphasize post-release treatment and counseling for infectious diseases and substance abuse as well as protection from abusive relationships.

“The bottom line of the evaluation is that women returning to the community after prison need so much,” said Visher. “The SVORI study showed that women are receiving so few services, compared to what they need, that it’s little wonder they don’t do better when they re-enter society.”

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For more information:

Read the SVORI evaluation reports for:

- Adult females: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/230420.pdf>
- Adult males: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/230419.pdf>
- Juvenile males: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/230423.pdf>

Notes

1. Mallik-Kane, Kamala, and Christy Visher, *Health and Prisoner Reentry: How Physical, Mental, and Substance Abuse Conditions Shape the Process of Reintegration*, Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2008, available at <http://www.urban.org/publications/411617.html>.
2. Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Missouri, Nevada, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Washington.
3. Although services varied, the research design (treatment versus control) was the same for all sites.



Data from the SVORI Multi-site Impact Evaluation is available in the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data. Learn more and apply for access to the data at <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/NACJD/studies/27101/detail>.

To learn more about re-entry into society, visit NIJ’s Web topic page at <http://www.nij.gov/nij/topics/corrections/reentry/welcome.htm>.



Watch an interview of Pamela Lattimore on SVORI at <http://nij.ncjrs.gov/multimedia/video-nijconf2009-lattimore.htm>.