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The Female Criminal: An Overview of Women's Drug Use and Offending Behaviour

Katie Willis and Catherine Rushforth

Women's drug use is believed to be a defining factor in their participation in crime and it is argued that the severity of women's drug use is more closely related to their criminality than it is for men, particularly for prostitution and property crime. Women's drug use and offending are different from men's. For instance, female offenders are more likely than males to be incarcerated for non-violent crimes, such as drug offences (14 percent of female prisoners, compared to 9 percent of males), whereas male offenders are more likely to be incarcerated for violent crimes such as assault (23 percent of male prisoners, compared to 14 percent of females) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002). Women drug users, particularly those who have been incarcerated, experience higher levels of abuse, economic hardship and other adversity in their lives than men.

This paper outlines Australian and international research on the links between women's drug use and their criminal behaviour. It first describes the common risk factors for these activities, then reviews key data and research on women's drug use and offending patterns. Finally, it considers these issues together.

The paper identifies that there is currently no national survey of women inmates' experience of drug use and offending. It suggests a need for this type of information to be collected for policy purposes, for example, in the management of women through the criminal justice system and in drug treatment settings.

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Acting Director

Women who participate in criminal activity are very likely to have a history of illicit drug use—we know this from recent survey work and from ethnographic research. However, our knowledge is generally limited by scant and inconsistent research.

Prior to the 1970s, women were virtually invisible to researchers examining alcohol and/or illicit drug use and crime.¹ Women were often not sampled or their results were grouped with male results, rather than reported separately, making it impossible to distinguish any variations in behaviours. By the 1970s, it was evident that the exclusion of women had resulted in a situation where very little was known about women's use of drugs (Ettorre 1992; Wilsnack & Beckman 1984). Since that time, much more research on women-specific issues has been covered in these two areas, particularly in relation to risk factors.

While the amount and the type of research about women's drug use and offending behaviours continue to improve, there are still significant gaps in understanding. For example, there have been/are currently few in-depth research projects examining the interrelationship between women's involvement in drug use and criminal activity, particularly in Australia. This is despite research that suggests the interplay between these two activities may be very different for women and men. A sound understanding of what drives a woman to use drugs and/or commit crime will assist in the development of appropriate, evidence-based prevention and treatment programs.

Risk Factors For Women's Drug Use and Criminality

To obtain an accurate picture of women's and men's drug use and offending behaviours it is important to seek information from both a wide range of people in the community and from different data sources. Ideally, information should be collected from members of the general population, the drug-using community,

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arrestees and incarcerated peoples. Information should also comprise administrative data, large-scale surveys and more in-depth research (for example, ethnographic work) (Figure 1). A mixture of these elements ensures that a broad spectrum of people and data are captured, thereby increasing the reliability and validity of research findings.

Studies of women’s (and men’s) drug use and criminal behaviours identify a number of common key risk factors, including parental/familial issues; childhood abuse and neglect; mental illness; lack of social supports; and association with other drug users. Table 1 briefly highlights some of the major issues in these areas.

Different studies attribute more or less weighting to individual risk factors in terms of their impact on offending and/or drug use; therefore, it is difficult to obtain an accurate or consistent picture of the degree of causality of individual risk factors. However, we do know that these risk factors are usually interconnected and so the higher the number of risk factors, the greater the likelihood of engaging in drug use and/or criminal activity.

Women’s Drug Use Patterns: What Do We Know?

Most of what we know about women’s drug use derives from administrative data collections and a small number of large-scale surveys. These are discussed below.

Administrative Data

Administrative data are routinely collected by agencies as part of their normal operation. These data are not designed to explain why events occur or why people engage in a particular behaviour, but they are useful in providing a general picture of the current situation (Makkai 1999b). For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics routinely collects information on all deaths in Australia. One use for this information is to indicate the number and the rate of drug-related deaths, particularly deaths in which opioids are considered to be the underlying cause of death, occurring in Australia each year. Degenhardt (2002) reports that males account for more than three-quarters of opioid overdose deaths in the 15–44 year age group, and this age group accounts for 80 percent of all opioid overdose deaths in Australia.

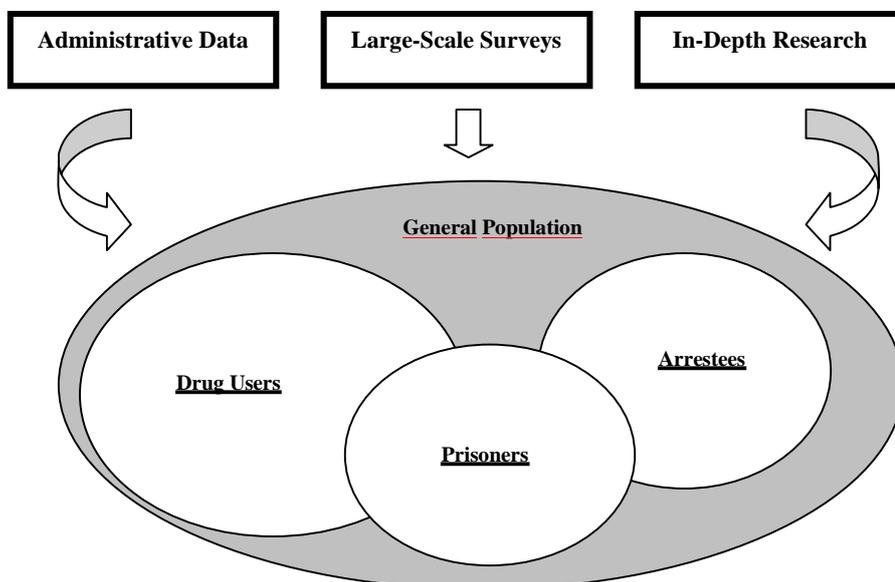
The *First Report on the National Minimum Data Set* for alcohol and other drug-treatment services in Australia found that slightly more than one-third of client registrations (excluding clients whose sole purpose is to provide pharmacological therapies such as methadone maintenance) in 2000–2001 were females (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, AIHW, 2002a). The failure of female drug users to seek treatment is well recognised (Chang 1994; Crawford and Elliott 1994; Stevens and

Wardlaw 1994). It is not known why many female drug users fail to access treatment, although it is suggested that one of the major factors is the lack of treatment agencies for women who are parents, particularly sole parents. It is also recognised that many Indigenous women and women of non-English speaking backgrounds are reticent to access treatment for their drug-use problems (for example, see New South Wales Select Committee on the Increase in Prisoner Population 2000). For these women, issues of language, marginality, discrimination, distrust and (for Indigenous women) dispossession, may impact on their willingness to seek treatment. As a result, very little is known about the special treatment needs of Indigenous women and women from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Large-Scale Surveys

Another way in which data relating to drug-use patterns can be obtained is through conducting large-scale quantitative surveys. Unlike administrative data, surveys can contain items to give a broader and/or more in-depth picture of a group, or to help provide some insight into particular patterns of behaviour. For example, the National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) is the most comprehensive study of licit and illicit drug use undertaken in Australia, with almost 27,000 respondents aged 14 years and older providing information on their own drug-use patterns, attitudes and behaviours in 2001 (AIHW 2002b). These results show that, in general, males were more likely than females to report having ever used illicit drugs (41 percent compared with 34 percent), or to report the recent (last 12 months) use of illicit drugs (20 percent compared to 14 percent) (AIHW 2002b). While there were decreases in the proportions of male subjects reporting recent use each of cannabis, heroin, amphetamines and ecstasy between the 1998 and 2001 surveys, there were increases in the proportions of female respondents reporting recent use of amphetamines and ecstasy. This may be an

Figure 1: A data collection system supporting sound research into women’s (and men’s) drug use and criminal activities



indication of a recent increase in the popularity of these substances among women. Similar information and overall trends are captured in two other large-scale quantitative surveys, the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health survey and the Australian Secondary Students' Use of Over-the-Counter and Illicit Substances survey (for more information see Research Centre for Gender and Health 2002 and White 2001).

One of the purposes of the NDSHS is to provide population estimates for drug use; therefore one of its limitations is that it does not capture the main illicit

drug-using population. For example, homeless and institutionalised persons are not sampled. Further limitations are that it does not ask more complex questions about why certain people use drugs and it contains only a small number of crime-related questions. As such, it is important to examine a wide variety of data sources, particularly those that adopt a purposive sampling frame, to gain a better understanding of drug-use patterns among those who are active participants in the drug economy. Refer to Makkai (1999b) for a discussion of the need for an integrated drug/crime

monitoring system in Australia.

The Australian Institute of Criminology's Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA) project uses voluntary confidential interviews and urinalysis to measure drug use by persons who have been detained by police. In studying this population, it is possible to gain a more accurate estimate of the prevalence of drug use among a high-risk population. This enhances the understanding of the links between crime and particular drug types and allows measurements of the changes in patterns of drug use (Makkai 1999a).

In 2002, among those who provided a urine sample across all sites, female detainees were more likely than male detainees to test positive for amphetamines (39 percent compared with 28 percent), benzodiazepines (33 percent compared to 21 percent) or opiates (27 percent compared to 17 percent) (Makkai & McGregor 2003). The authors report that the differences between males and females fluctuate each year, and this may be due to the smaller sample size for female respondents. These results are considerably higher than those reported by the NDSHS, which indicated that three percent of women had used amphetamines recently (in the previous 12 months), one percent had used tranquillisers/sleeping pills recently and 0.25 percent had used heroin, street methadone and/or other opiates (for non-medical purposes) recently (AIHW 2002c).

Differences between the two surveys are not surprising given that those engaging in crime typically use more drugs than those who do not (Makkai 2001).

Although specifically surveying a population of people who commonly use drugs, like the NDSHS, DUMA has certain limitations. For instance, because the survey is ongoing (conducted on a quarterly basis) and large-scale, there are restrictions on the number of in-depth questions that are able to be included in the survey instrument. Naturally, this then constrains any potential analyses of detainees' drug use itself, or indeed the

Table 1: Risk factors common to women's drug use and criminal activity

Risk Factor: parental/familial issues

- Family problems are identified as a key turning point leading to women's drug addiction and/or criminality.
- Drug abuse, alcoholism and/or mental health problems may be more prominent in the families of drug-addicted women than drug-addicted men.
- Women who commit crime, including drug-related crime, continue to be drawn from those who experience economic and social deprivation.
- In a study of drug-using women in United States prisons (Peugh & Belenko 1999), two in five had parents who abused alcohol or drugs and one-half had a close family member who was incarcerated—these rates were higher among drug-using women than abstaining women or men.

References: Gelsthorpe & Morris 2002; Hser et al. 1987; Peugh & Belenko 1999.

Risk Factor: childhood abuse and neglect

- Women in prison are sexually, physically and/or emotionally victimised at levels exceeding those of women in the wider community.
- Many female inmates report experiencing multiple types of abuses.
- Australian research (Lievore 2002) indicates that as many as 85 percent of female inmates have been subjected to sexual abuse, while the number of women physically and emotionally abused may be higher.
- It is estimated that around half of the women undergoing drug treatment are victims of childhood sexual abuse.

References: Gil-Rivas et al. 1996; Kevin 1994; Lievore 2002; Stephens 1992; Western Australian Department of Justice 2002.

Risk Factor: mental illness

- Mental illness is an important, often co-related, risk factor for women's drug use and criminality and appears to be a far more complex problem among women than men.
- Women are twice as likely as men to report extreme levels of psychiatric distress and at higher levels than men for depression, anxiety states, and somatisation disorders.
- In a 2002 study at Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre (Hockings et al. 2002), 57 percent of women prisoners were diagnosed with a specific mental illness, the most common being depression (39 percent of the sample).

References: Byqvist 1999; Connor 1997; Hockings et al. 2002; Hser et al. 1987; Hurley & Dunne, cited in Connor 1997; Mauer et al. 1999.

Risk Factor: social supports

- Work experience and employment opportunities for drug-using women are often limited, particularly drug-using female inmates, who are less likely than alcohol-using women or abstainers, and much less likely than males, to have been employed prior to imprisonment.
- For drug-using women with parental responsibilities, career options are severely limited.
- Australian research finds that a high recidivism rate among drug-using women offenders is due to their limited ability to manage addiction following release, as they have limited access to appropriate supports to assist them in coping. These findings are consistent with overseas research.

References: New South Wales Select Committee on the Increase in Prisoner Population 2000; Peugh & Belenko 1999; Silverman 1982.

Risk Factor: association with other drug users

- Most women (and men) are initiated into illicit drug use through association with a male drug user and, in the case of women, usually with a sexual intimate.
- Rosenbaum (1985) found that when women were introduced to heroin by a male, it was almost always at her own instigation.
- The person who influences first use is usually a daily narcotics user and the first use of narcotics for the majority of women (and men) is provided as a gift.

References: Eldred & Washington 1976; Hser et al. 1987; Sargent 1992; Morningstar & Chitwood 1995; Maher 1997; Silverman 1982.

links between their drug-use and criminal activities.

In-Depth Research

Denton's (2001) ethnographic research on female drug dealers in Victoria is one of a few in-depth studies of drug users to have been conducted in recent years. This research, focussing on face-to-face interviews with sixteen key informants, was undertaken over a four-year period. Research such as Denton's is useful in developing models to explain the reasons behind particular patterns of behaviour, rather than providing descriptions on the extent of these behaviours, because of the limited sample sizes in this type of research.

Women's Offending Patterns: What Do We Know?

The availability, quality and usefulness of data on women's offending differ at each stage of the criminal justice system (such as at arrest or trial, within prison or other punishment settings, or post-release). In addition, not all crimes result in arrest, not all arrests result in convictions and not all convictions result in incarceration. Therefore, it is necessary to sample from all parts of the criminal justice system to avoid under-representation of the population (Makkai 1999a; Makkai 2002). While this does not solve the problem of accessing offenders who never come to the attention of the authorities, it does assist in providing an accurate picture of those who do.

Administrative Data

Australian statistics—drawn from official Victorian, Queensland and South Australian police—indicate that just over one in five alleged offenders are females, with the most prevalent offences being theft and assault (Australian Institute of Criminology 2002).²

Prison data indicate that women comprise less than seven percent of the Australian prison population. While the number of female inmates is low in comparison with males, there has been a significant increase in the number of female inmates over time—a 95 percent increase between 1992 and 2002 (Australian Bureau of Statistics

2003)³. Significant increases in the number of women prisoners have also been observed in both the United Kingdom and the United States of America (Home Office 2002; United States General Accounting Office 1999).

Types of offences for which female offenders are incarcerated are broadly similar to those of incarcerated males, although women are less likely than men to be incarcerated for violent offences such as Homicide, assault, sex offences and robbery. The main offences for which female offenders are incarcerated include drug offences, assault and robbery, whereas male offenders are more likely to be incarcerated for assault, robbery and unlawful entry with intent (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003). The absolute number of women incarcerated for drug offences has almost doubled in the last 10 years.

Large-Scale Surveys

There exist a small number of jurisdictional surveys of female prisoners that shed light on their backgrounds and offending histories. For example, a study conducted among female inmates in New South Wales in 1993 (Kevin 1994) found that:

- One-third of the women sampled had a property offence as their most serious offence, while one-quarter had a drug offence as their most serious offence.
- More than three in five women reported that they were under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs at the time they committed the offence for which they were incarcerated, and around one-half of these were under the influence of more than one drug.
- Almost three-quarters of the women reported that they believed that there was a relationship between their drug use and their current imprisonment, with the most commonly reported relationship being to obtain money to purchase drugs.
- A majority of the women did not have an education past year 10 (or equivalent), less than one-third had work experience totalling one year or more and almost two-thirds identified

Government benefits as their primary source of income prior to incarceration.

- One-half reported a prior family history of drug/alcohol problems and slightly less than one-half reported that they had been the victims of sexual or physical abuse in the past.

A recent profile of female inmates in Western Australia has observed similar findings, particularly in terms of drug use and hardships experienced in their pasts (see Western Australian Department of Justice 2002).

While these and other similar studies are valuable in improving our basic understanding of women's drug use and crime, they are nevertheless of limited use in understanding why women engage in these activities. Furthermore, they do not deal (at least in any comprehensive way) with the complex factors linking these two behaviours. Indeed, very little qualitative research has been conducted on female offenders in Australia that deals with these issues.

In-Depth Research

As already mentioned, Denton's ethnographic study is the only Australian study that examines female offenders. Focussing on female drug dealers, Denton (2001) also explored other criminal activities that were undertaken by the women in the sample. Other than the sale of drugs, property offences, such as fraud and shoplifting, were the most common offences committed by women in the study. Moreover, it was concluded that these property offences were also tightly integrated with the women's drug businesses. For instance, stolen property and money provided both a critical source of income and an important status among business acquaintances.

Denton's study is important not only because it taps into a little known area, but it also provides rare insight into women's experience after they are released from prison. There is scant information available on female offenders post-release, particularly in Australia. Currently, administrative data on recidivism is the primary source of information available relating to Australian female prisoners

post-release. These data provide only a narrow perspective and, as such, are of limited use. A majority of our knowledge in this area comes from the international literature. This literature suggests that women have special needs that must be addressed when they are released from prison, such as access to affordable housing, social supports and the attainment of skills and qualifications that can lead them into meaningful employment following their release (Social Exclusion Unit 2002; Carnaby 1998). These issues are also supported by Denton's (2001) research.

Interrelationships Between Women's Drug Use and Offending: What Do We Know?

Most of what we know about interrelationships between women's drug use and criminal behaviour comes from surveys and ethnographic studies in the United States of America. What is evident from these studies is that women's drug use and criminal behaviour, like men's, are dynamic and heterogenous in nature. As such, there is no single explanation that describes why they become involved in drug use and/or in crime. Despite this, there are a number of general themes that emerge in the international literature. One of the most important issues is that women's drug use appears to be a defining factor in their participation in crime in that the severity of women's drug use is more closely related to their criminality than it is for men.⁴ There is also compelling evidence that women's drug use is strongly associated with involvement in the illicit drug economy, prostitution and property crime.

A number of in-depth studies of women involved in the drug economy indicate that most women who deal drugs do it to have access to drugs for personal use and generate income. Moreover, income from drug dealing appears to provide female drug users with financial independence and a certain degree of self-determination.⁵ Some studies point to this as the means by which women avoid becoming involved in prostitution as a source of income for drugs.⁶

Drugs are certainly not the sole reason why women (and men) become involved in crime. Indeed, drug use is generally initiated some time after involvement in criminal activity (Makkai 1998; Stevens 1998). However, it seems that once women and men become addicted to drugs, they are far more likely to commit crime than those who do not use drugs and that escalating drug use is associated with increased criminal activity.⁷ Importantly, prostitution is particularly prevalent among women drug users.⁸ Research on the relationship between prostitution and illicit drug use indicates that as many as 70 percent of women partially support their habit through prostitution, while women addicts commit at least as much as, and sometimes more, theft and forgery than men addicts (Anglin & Hser 1987).

In an in-depth study of 100 women heroin users in the United States of America, Rosenbaum (cited in Pollock 1999, pp.49-50) found that addiction changed criminal patterns of prostitution. High-class call girls, if addicted, would accept increasingly less money for their services because they needed to buy drugs and could not afford to reject a customer. Eventually the women became increasingly desperate, and their marketability and bargaining power reduced, that they ended up as streetwalkers, accepting a fraction of the money they once received for their services. A similar pattern has been recently observed in Brisbane, Queensland (Noonan, 2003).

Conclusion

Australian data and research support evidence in the international literature that women's drug use and offending are different from men's drug use and offending. In particular:

- Female offenders are more likely to be incarcerated for drug offences, assault and robbery, whereas male offenders are more likely to be incarcerated for assault, robbery and unlawful entry with intent.
- Female drug users, particularly those who have been incarcerated, experience higher levels of abuse, economic

hardship and other adversity in their lives than men.

- Women's drug use is a defining factor in their participation in crime in that the severity of their drug use is more closely related to their criminality than it is for men, particularly for prostitution and property crime activities—a paucity of Australian research in this area makes it difficult to surmise the local situation.

It is important to examine a variety of data sources to obtain an accurate picture of women's drug use and offending as there are limitations on what certain data sources provide. Using a range of data also assists in the validation process. While administrative data are useful for obtaining an overview of general patterns, large-scale quantitative surveys and in-depth qualitative research help to provide important information about more complex relationships. Similarly, it is necessary to obtain information from various populations, such as the general community, drug users and offenders to ensure that certain sections of the community are not excluded.

This paper highlights that there are administrative data that can inform us about Australian women's drug use and criminal activities. However, it also underscores the lack of available in-depth research on the links between these behaviours, particularly at the national level. Even data that are available nationally, such as the NDSHS and DUMA data, have limited utility. There is, therefore, a pressing need for this type of information to be collected. Such information has important policy application, for example, in the management of women through the criminal justice system and in drug treatment settings, as well as in the prevention and/or reduction of re-offending.

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Notes:

- 1 For example, see Bean 2002; Boyd 1999; Broom & Stevens 1991; Dance 1994; Ettorre 1992; Fagan 1984; Hamilton 1994; Hubbard & Pratt 2002; Rosenbaum 1985.
- 2 DUMA data also show that female detainees (who comprise 16 percent of the DUMA sample) are most likely to have a property (41 percent) or violent (16 percent) offence as the most serious offence for which they are currently being detained (Makkai & McGregor 2003). Around 8 percent of female detainees (compared with 6 percent of males) are detained for drug offences.
- 3 There are several suggestions explaining this increase, including truth in sentencing legislation, increased sentence lengths, the use of imprisonment for first offenders, an increase in remandees, increased poverty and unemployment and an increase in drug offences.
- 4 For example, see Anglin & Hser 1987; Boyd & Faith 1999; Hser et al. 1987; Fagan 1994; McClellan et al. 1999.
- 5 Denton 2001; Fagan 1994; Morgan & Joe 1996; Pollock 1999; Sommers et al. 1996.
- 6 Denton 2001; Fagan 1994; Sommers et al. 1996.
- 7 Anglin & Hser 1987; Fagan 1994; Hser et al. 1987; Pollock 1999.
- 8 Bretteville-Jensen & Sutton 1996; Fagan 1994; Goldstein et al. 1992; Hser et al. 1987; Hser et al. 1992.

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