

Building Community, Reducing Risk: Measuring Recidivism and Effectiveness in the Women At Risk Program

Felicia Blow
University of North Carolina at Asheville
Sociology

Faculty Advisor: Keith Bramlett
Community Advisors: Patrice Wishon, Women At Risk

Abstract

The Women at Risk program in Asheville, North Carolina is a program of Homeward Bound of Western North Carolina (formerly of Western Carolinians for Criminal Justice). It serves as an alternative to jail or prison, and aims to meet the unique needs of women within the criminal justice system. Through court advocacy, case management, and weekly support and psycho-educational therapy groups, they address not only the needs specific to navigating criminal charges, but also to overcoming self-destructive and abusive behavior that contributes to the women's risk of imprisonment. In the past, the Women at Risk program has shown that 90% of program graduates successfully complete probation terms and stay out of jail or prison. Given the rapidly increasing prison population – and more specifically the large number of women becoming incarcerated – as well as high rates of recidivism, the effectiveness of Women At Risk as an alternative to incarceration is significant. The purpose of this public service project is to aid in the collection of qualitative and quantitative data concerning past Women at Risk clients in order to determine the rates of success for graduates and early terminations from the program at predetermined lengths of time following their exits from the program. Understanding how many and which participants have had additional involvement with the criminal justice system following their exits is essential to goals of program evaluation and can be used to assist in applying for grants and other forms of funding to further the efforts and scope of the work. Collection of this data is imperative and, as such, is ongoing, though the completion of this project has made current the records of participants from up to three years post-exit, providing much-needed information for the staff while offering me unique insights into the processes of court and jail systems and the importance of community-building efforts in addressing recidivism.

Key Words: Program Evaluation, Criminal Justice, Recidivism, Women's Justice

Origins of the Project

Women at Risk is a non-profit organization in Asheville, North Carolina. As of 2013, it is a program of Homeward Bound of Western North Carolina, which primarily provides housing services and supports with the aim of ending homelessness in the region. The focus of Women at Risk varies slightly in that it serves women involved in the criminal justice system and acts as an alternative to incarceration. However, given the difficulties in obtaining stable work and housing that can arise from or contribute to criminal behavior, many Women at Risk clients may benefit from the housing services Homeward Bound provides.

Women at Risk is a community-based treatment program for women at risk of incarceration and aims to reduce the rapidly growing numbers of women involved in the criminal justice system, as well as rates of recidivism. By providing structures to help women comply with terms of probation and community service, while simultaneously addressing issues of mental health and substance abuse, it provides an effective alternative to jail or prison, where these needs are not always met. This also allows women to remain with their families and make progress toward job attainment, housing stability, and other personal goals while fulfilling the terms of their sentences. The program provides individual case management, court advocacy, jail outreach, and weekly therapy and support groups. These groups form the crux of the program and include a 16-week psycho-educational therapy group, which is required of all clients, as well as two optional ten-week programs. Deciding Against Violence is an abuser treatment program designed to help women develop skill to be non-violent in relationships with others, and Seeking Safety is an outpatient substance abuse treatment and relapse prevention group. In the past, Women at Risk was able to provide transportation for clients as well as on-site child care, as a majority of the women are mothers; however, due to budget and staff cuts, they are not currently able to provide these services, though their commitment to keeping mothers and children together through alternative sentencing remains.

My first contact with the Women at Risk program came in January 2014 when I began an internship there in conjunction with an internship course in the Sociology department. I met with Patrice Wishon, Kim Taylor, and Betsy Burnett, the three permanent staff of the program, and expressed my interests in women's issues and the criminal justice system, and my want to learn more about the non-profit sector, and they decided that I would be a good match for them. From then on, I have been involved with the program in several capacities, and when the opportunity arose to conduct a service project with a community partner, Women at Risk was my natural first choice.

Prior to taking on the current project, my work as an intern and volunteer with Women at Risk had many dimensions. I accompanied Kim and Betsy to advocate for sentencing alternatives for clients during their court appearances and to the Buncombe County Detention Facility to provide support and outreach for past and potential future clients. I took phone calls and monitored the office's front desk, a necessity typically fulfilled by volunteers that might otherwise take time away from staff's already busy schedules. Most often, I assisted in the weekly client lunch, which is prepared by volunteer organizations and served prior to the weekly therapy group. I created updated flyers and brochures about what the program has to offer, and to advertise their weekly intake clinic for new clients and helped distribute them to other organizations in the area with similar goals. Eventually, I was able to conduct parts of the intake for women entering the

program, gaining first-hand experience in the process. Most of these tasks offered new learning experiences for me in addition to helping the staff make time for other responsibilities.

Upon learning that I was eligible to take part in the Community Engaged Scholar program, I began to think about how I could conduct this public service project. Because we had an established rapport and I was aware of the shortage of staff members the program has, I contacted Patrice to see if they would be interested in having me complete a project for them, asking her to identify a major need that I could assist them in accomplishing. Having made flyers and brochures in the past, I thought I might produce more promotional materials or a program handbook of some sort, but did not know. After discussing with Kim and Betsy, it was decided that I would run record checks on past graduates and terminations from the program, documenting additional arrests, convictions, and incarcerations following their exit dates in order to measure the success rates of each group. Typically this data is collected for each client one year and three years after their exit from the program; however, with state budget cuts, a move to a new parent organization, and limited staff, these records have fallen behind. This data provides essential information for program evaluation and can be used to show the successful outcomes of program clients in order to apply for grants and secure funding for Women at Risk.

Methods and Work Undertaken

The data collected for this project were gathered from the website of North Carolina Department of Public Safety (NCDPS). This information is publicly available and can be found by conducting an offender search on the site. Patrice provided two lists of names – one of successful graduates of the program, and one of early exits, or terminations. Individuals in the latter group ended their involvement with Women at Risk without completing the required 16 weeks of group meetings. This may happen by choice, through absenteeism, or as a result of greater circumstances. Because many Women at Risk clients have pending charges during the time of their participation with the program and are awaiting their court decision or sentence, it is entirely possible that some women may become incarcerated during their time there, and this was revealed to be the case for some women according to their records and the cause of their early exit from the program.

First, past clients whose files were due for updating were identified and compiled according to their exit status and date of exit. These clients' records were then accessed via the NCDPS website and several pieces of information were collected if any criminal charges were found after their date of exit. These included:

- Offender Status: Inactive, meaning the individual is not currently involved with the NCDPS at this time, or Active meaning the individual is currently either on probation (a sentence served outside of the custody of a detention facility), on parole (provisional early release from a custodial sentence), or incarcerated.
- Additional Arrests: Charges for which an individual was not convicted were not accessible, so arrests were recorded if any additional convictions were found.
- Additional Convictions: Convictions were recorded only if the related offense occurred following the exit from Women at Risk. Convictions were documented by level of offense (misdemeanor or felony), type of offense, and year of conviction.

- Additional Incarcerations: Incarcerations were recorded by year admitted and released, if applicable, as well as if the individual is out on parole.

These data were recorded in Microsoft Excel to be integrated with Women at Risk's official database and further broken down according to factors such as violent or drug-related offenses. Some offenses were not recorded if found, such as minor traffic violations, though Driving While Intoxicated, Driving Without a Seatbelt, and Driving with License Revoked were recorded as they are fairly common charges for Women at Risk clients.

Following data collection, some statistical analysis was done in order to determine success rates for previous clients. Both groups were measured by the percentage of additional arrests and convictions and percentage of additional incarcerations. We also looked at the most common offenses for women with additional charges, rates of successful completion of probation, and number of additional charges on average. This offers a more comprehensive understanding of the outcomes of these women once they leave the Women at Risk program along more dimensions than simply being arrested or convicted or not.

Ties to Academia

This work has strong ties to my work in sociology, as well as psychology in some ways. As an alternative to incarceration, Women at Risk addresses both the macro, meaning the societal, and the micro, or individual, factors involved in their approach to assisting women with criminal involvement and risk behaviors. While addressing personal risk factors of substance abuse, emotional abuse, and victimization, Women at Risk also provides a restorative justice model, rather than a retributive one.

Beginning with more macro-level ties to academia, I found significant links between my work at Women at Risk and my work in sociology, particularly in the course entitled Social Control and Deviant Behavior. This sociology course examines how certain behaviors become categorized as deviant, then as criminal, and the ways in which society aims to minimize and control these behaviors through different formal and informal mechanisms, which today revolves around incarceration.

In the past deviant behavior was thought of as the result of demonic possession or of individual pathology of which a person could be cured. Over time, other theories of deviance and social control emerged, and today the dominant frameworks revolve around the understanding that what is considered deviant or criminal is socially constructed, rather than inherently understood across time periods and cultures (Pfohl). Because of this, it is necessary to draw distinctions between when a behavior is simply considered wrong or deviant and when it is considered criminal. *Mala in se* refers to an act that is wrong or evil in and of itself, often illustrated by the example of murder, which most social norms and moral leanings would regard as inherently wrong. This is contrasted with *mala prohibita* acts, which are considered wrong only because they are prohibited by law. Therefore, there may be acts that carry criminal charges, but are not necessarily considered deviant or egregious by much of society. These acts are often illustrated by so-called "vice crimes", such as gambling, and particularly, drug use.

Mechanisms of social control are societal and political processes that regulate individual and group behavior in order to gain compliance with norms. Informal mechanisms of social control generally refer to socialization processes, whereby a person is taught the norms of a society or

subculture and trained to act according to these norms. Typically the sanctions for deviating from the norm at this level are interpersonal and may include something like verbal admonishment for a behavior, shame and ridicule, or social isolation. Formal mechanisms of social control are often embodied in governmental policies and laws, which turn definitions of deviance into crime. These sanctions have more long-lasting and tangible effects, and historically have revolved around practices of torture, murder, exile, and imprisonment, all of which can still be seen in some form today in formal sanctions in the United States prison system.

The default mechanism of social control in the present day is formal and is characterized by the criminal justice and prison systems. This represents a model of retributive justice. Retributive justice revolves around the notions that crime is identified as a violation of the law and an act against the state, therefore the criminal justice system is in control of people labeled criminals through some establishment of guilt and is meant to reinforce the values of conformity for these individuals. This is attempted through punitive measures, such as incarceration and the withholding of certain civil rights and luxuries. Restorative justice, in contrast, views crime as an act against another person or community and has a strong emphasis on rehabilitation and restitution. Punishment alone is seen as ineffective and harmful to the individual and community. This model addresses the individual and social dimensions of why crime occurs and places focus not on a person's past behaviors but on making changes for the future (Elis).

Women at Risk represents a model of restorative justice by offering an alternative to incarceration and focusing on rehabilitation and a multi-dimensional approach to resolving risk behaviors. Their methods do not dismiss personal responsibility as component of reducing criminal behaviors, but they also recognize the influence of social factors, such as poverty and homelessness, and do not view substance abuse as solely a matter of poor personal decisions.

Restorative justice programs have been shown to be more effective at reducing recidivism, as well as providing more positive outcomes for participants. These programs also reduce the state cost per offender. Women at Risk's 2010 report to the North Carolina General Assembly stated the Average Daily State Cost of the Women at Risk program to be just over five dollars, while the cost of prison incarceration was about \$74. However, cost reduction may not be the main goal of the retributive justice model or the current prison systems. The prison-industrial complex, whereby the privatization of prisons has incentivized the rapid expansion of the prison system for businesses supplying goods to these facilities, has become a major point of discussion with regards to the current system of incarceration and provides additional links to my own academic pursuits.

This is a topic of importance in sociology, and I also learned about it in my Liberal Studies Colloquium in the honors department. Reading Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* elucidated a lot about the prison system as well as the policies regarding the War on Drugs. This work focuses on the racial implications of these policies, but they have created gendered results as well.

Research has shown correlations between substance abuse and criminal risk factors, and with the War on Drugs, the number of drug arrests, convictions, and incarcerations has ballooned rapidly. This trend has been impacted by stricter drug laws, mandatory sentencing practices, and continuous prison expansion, leading to a state of mass incarceration. In the past, women represented significantly less of the prison population, but these laws have led to a stark increase of the number of women incarcerated, and often on drug-related convictions. Because women

are less often associated with or the perpetrators of violent crime, they were underrepresented in prisons, but with new policies enacting much stricter drug laws, drug arrests for women have doubled in the last few decades (Merolla). Women at Risk's gender-responsive model and outpatient substance abuse group, Seeking Safety, work to address these intersections, without perpetuating the inequalities present in the gender-segregated prison system.

Substance abuse is highly correlated with interpersonal violence, and this aspect of the project can be linked to two courses on this subject that I have taken at UNC Asheville: Violence in America in sociology, and Family Violence in psychology. Both courses examined aspects of domestic violence experienced by women involved in the program, either as the survivor or perpetrator of the violence. In reporting personal information at the time of intake, many women report histories of physical and sexual abuse, both as a child and in adult relationships. Additionally, the women involved in the Deciding Against Violence group have been on the perpetrating end of violence. Substance abuse can both instigate and arise from abusive behavior, and poverty also has bearing on these issues, illustrating the cyclical nature of these problems, as well as the need for both personal and societal interventions.

Challenges Faced and Responses to Those Challenges

The major challenges I faced in completing this project arose from complications with the NCDPS platform and limited access to certain records. Accessing information via the website of the Department of Public Safety is simple enough, but interpreting that information can become complicated. For example, it was critical to pay close attention to the dates listed for each offense, not just for the conviction because a charge that occurred prior to involvement with Women at Risk may not have been sentenced until after graduation or termination. These charges did not count as additional arrests or convictions. Additionally, an individual may be listed as inactive according to their offender status, but this did not necessarily mean that they have no additional convictions. In several cases, a person with an inactive status may have had additional charges, but had completed probation and therefore was counted as inactive.

Another issue that arose quickly when searching for records in the NCDPS database was that of repeated names. Several Women at Risk clients with more common names produced results for up to 30 individuals, and with no additional identifying information, it was impossible to know which one would be the right person. To solve this issue, I had to work with Patrice as she located the names within Women at Risk's organizational database and relayed additional information to me, such as middle name or date of birth, which then allowed me to identify which listing was the correct one.

The last challenge faced with regards to using the Department of Public Safety records for data collection was that a handful of the past clients were not found in these records. This was puzzling at first, because all Women at Risk clients have had interaction with the criminal justice system, and these records contain a full history of convictions, going back as far as the 1990s for some clients. Even for women who may have had only one conviction decades ago, this would be present in their file. At the same time that Patrice helped me to identify women whose names generated multiple results, she looked at the files of these women in order to figure out why they would not show up in the NCDPS data.

Looking across these files, we found some similarities. Some women were not directly involved with the court system, but rather were referred to the program by the Department of Social Services (DSS). DSS refers women to the program most often in cases of some form of child abuse, and these clients often complete the Deciding Against Violence course along with the standard 16-week group. Upon successful completion of the program, these charges may be dropped, explaining one reason for the absent records. Some women also had prior charges that were fairly minor, which may have been dropped upon completion of the Women at Risk groups or granted a “Prayer for Judgement Continued”, or PJC. A PJC may be granted by a judge in cases of traffic violations and some misdemeanor offenses, in which case the individual pleads guilty to the charge, but it does not appear on their record, and barring any additional offenses within a certain number of years, it may be expunged completely. This law is unique to North and South Carolina and offered another explanation. Lastly, women whom Patrice knew to have criminal charges, but who still did not appear in the DPS data were found to have served a term of unsupervised probation, which, unlike supervised probation, does not impose strict regulations and is not as closely monitored by the courts through reporting to a probation officer.

All of this offered new information and will be useful in future efforts to collect this data. To prevent confusion between common names, the correct woman’s official NCDPS offender number was recorded so that it could be used in directly searching for each file and the year of offense and conviction were noted so that data would not be duplicated in the future, and additional charges would not be mistakenly recorded. Discovering the various reasons a woman’s file would not appear in this data will also be useful in preventing confusion in further periods of data collection, and all of this will increase the efficiency of the process and help with the sustainability of this work.

In addition to the challenges faced in navigating the Department of Public Safety website to gather the correct information, there were some issues with limited access to other channels of information. The NCDPS records only represent charges, convictions, and incarcerations occurring within the State of North Carolina, so charges filed in other states would not be represented. This may cause some issues of validity in the data set because it may not represent a complete or fully accurate set, though we cannot know for sure without that data. In the past, Women at Risk has had full access to comprehensive records of their clients criminal charges, not just the publicly available data, however this has been restricted recently resulting in the exclusive use of DPS data for this project. They are working on regaining access to more information on their clients, and if this is achieved, the data will be much more comprehensive.

Results

The results from this project were in line with previous reports of Women at Risk post-exit success rates. Women involved in the program had better outcomes than women post-incarceration, and graduates of the program fared better than early exits. This sample of clients represented women exiting the program in 2010 and 2011, and of the graduate from this time frame, 88 percent remained free of additional arrests and convictions and none were incarcerated. Rates for terminations were slightly lower, at 66% avoiding any criminal contact, though two of these convictions resulted in incarceration.

	Graduates	Terminations	Total
Number of Clients	34	36	70
Additional Arrests & Convictions	4	12	16
Success Rate – Arrests & Convictions	88%	66%	77%
Additional Incarcerations	0	2	2
Success Rate - Incarcerations	100%	94%	97%

The most common convictions were Driving While Intoxicated, which was present for a quarter (four of 16) of all additional arrests and convictions, and Larceny, which was present for ten of the 16 women with additional offenses. Both women who were incarcerated following their time at Women at Risk were convicted of multiple larceny charges, however, they were both paroled for their sentences.

These quantitative results constitute one level of analysis and present just the numerical findings of the data collection. The next step will be to compile these results into a comprehensive report documenting more qualitative data and making connections between the two. Past Women at Risk reports have included sections about client demographics at intake, including income level, housing status, highest grade completed, and clients who are mothers. Knowing these demographics can also aid in program evaluation efforts by illustrating what the population being served looks like.

Sustainability

Because the Women at Risk program admits new clients every week and continues to be a reliably successful program with support from state legislators and district attorneys, the ongoing

collection of updated client record data is necessary for internal program evaluation and external documentation of successful client outcomes. Given the limited permanent staff Women at Risk now has, and their focus on one-on-one case management and group sessions, this kind of work can easily fall by the wayside due to time constraints. However, I feel that it is completely sustainable for completion by volunteers.

Homeward Bound is a well known non-profit in the Asheville area, and generally has many volunteers on hand, often students from UNCA. Being that Women at Risk is a bit of a smaller program outside the scope of homelessness services, and only recently acquired by Homeward Bound, it may be less visible to people seeking volunteer work, but they can use the help nonetheless.

The work conducted on this piece of the project has brought Women at Risk data up-to-date for clients' three years post-exit record checks. Data still needs to be collected for one year checks for some clients. I intend to help with this work as much as possible, but inevitably will be leaving the Asheville area. I feel that if I can get all records up-to-date and help develop a streamlined process for collecting and compiling this data from the various sources, it will help the program tremendously and make this work more sustainable.

Women at Risk is also in the process of upgrading their organizational database to be more efficient and simple to navigate, which will help with these efforts. However, this also requires a significant amount of time and effort, so progress in that area may be slower.

Conclusion

This public service project resulted in gains for both the community partner, Women at Risk, and the student researcher. Conducting record checks and collecting data about past clients is a necessary part of the work done by the program and helps them to understand how well the program is working, and where potential changes might take place. Understanding how well participants perform in the long-run helps to assess the benefits of the program as an alternative to incarceration, as it generally presents a short-term, more cost effective option, with even better long-term results to imprisonment.

The findings from this project demonstrate that Women at Risk is still achieving its goals of keeping clients out of jail and helping them to successfully complete probation and reduce criminal risk behaviors. The majority of both graduates and early exit participants had no additional arrests or convictions, and the percent of graduates who remain out of prison has risen from previous Women at Risk reports from 88% to 100% success. This is extremely important and useful information that will provide evidence of the benefits and success of the program and may be used in securing funding and support from state and private agencies.

This project offered me new insights on how the criminal justice system functions and allowed me to make connections between my academic pursuits and a real-world application of concepts. I utilized my knowledge from studying in the sociology department to understand how so many women in the program became defined as criminals largely due to their drug use and how social issues like poverty and mass incarceration perpetuate negative outcomes for some of these women.

It has been a privilege to work with Patrice, Kim, and Betsy in the various intern and volunteer work I have done with them, as well as this current project. I look forward to continuing this work in order to improve the program outcomes and help them reach their goals. It has been a significant learning experience for me to see how non-profit work is conducted and to learn more about the law and the operations of the criminal justice system, and this is knowledge I will carry with me both in my future academic and career pursuits.

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