

Stories and Stats: A Mixed Method Approach to the 2008 Profile of Women in Prison Project

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Abstract

The Profile of Women in Prison Survey has been an ongoing project since 2001, and has culminated in three reports (2002, 2003, 2005) detailing statistical information about women in prison. This survey process included examining key features of the women's lives before coming to prison, evaluating the services provided to them in prison, and their expectations around release. For the second stage of the project it was determined that a new approach was needed in order to provide useful and applicable information about women in prison of relevance to the organisation; that the causes and experiences of female criminality is best obtained directly from the women themselves. This paper describes the process and reasoning by which we went about adapting the Profile of Women in Prison Survey into a mixed methods project and the lessons we learned along the way about conducting research with female prisoners. With the data collection complete, and the analysis beginning, one of the biggest strengths of the study, triangulation of participant data with official records, has become apparent.

From 1995-2002 the rate of female imprisonment grew at four times the rate of men's imprisonment in Australia (Gleb, 2003)¹. Accordingly, women's corrections have increasingly become an important part of the work of the Department of Corrective Services, culminating in the Department's commitment to ongoing research on the characteristics and needs of women in prison. The embodiment of this commitment has been a 120-200 question survey examining female prisoners' lives before prison, their experiences of life in prison, and their expectations about their release. This paper will discuss how we took the next step from this survey to produce a study that fulfilled the organisation's need for a greater understanding of female criminality and the needs of female prisoners, while continuing in part the statistical coverage from the previous surveys. While the research this paper refers to is not strictly an evaluation, there are some important lessons to be learned that are of great relevance to evaluations in a prison setting, particularly regarding the use of data triangulation.

It is worth considering exactly why women need different treatment in the prison system; in principle the legal system treats men and women's crimes as indistinguishable, so surely prison conditions for the genders should be equivalent? Is an interest in the needs of imprisoned women, with an eye towards treating women differently, an exercise in politically correct, benevolent sexism? Perhaps, if not for the fact that the entire prison paradigm is traditionally designed around the needs of male prisoners with few programs specifically designed for women (Sorbello, Eccleston, Ward, Jones, 2002, pp. 199-202), female prisoners have typically experienced significant abuse, and social and economic deprivation (Department of Corrective Services, 2003, 2005; Department of Justice, 2002), have more mental health issues (Byrne & Howells, 2000), and are less likely to be the perpetrator of a violent offence than a male offender (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005)². A key point is that significant good can be done by focusing on the needs of imprisoned women; they are less likely than men to reoffend (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007³; Maden, Skapinakis, Lewis, Scott, Burnett, Jamieson, 2006), and anywhere between 66%⁴ and 75% (Armtage, 2000) of female prisoners have children. This makes women an important point of intervention in the intergenerational transmission of criminality and poverty; helping women improve their own lives during and following prison will also affect the lives of their children, potentially preventing continuing cycles of abuse, neglect, poverty, drug addiction, and criminality.

So what was found from the survey? Essentially a confirmation of what is already known; imprisoned women typically live lives of entrenched abuse, have limited educational and employment history and prospects, have significant addiction issues, and have little to return to on the outside once released. The surveys had provided a lot of useful statistics that were in common use within and outside the Department, most notably in the development of the 'Woman Centred Philosophy' at Boronia Pre-Release Centre, but had lacked descriptive power and any clear conclusions or recommendations about imprisoned women. Properly used, quantitative research can provide unique insights into offending, but without examining the thoughts and actions of offenders directly, little meaning is derived from collecting such broad and disparate statistics.

Why the Methodology Changed

The change in methodology took place for two broad reasons, the organisational need had changed, and the approach of the surveys had limited the value they could provide the Department and the prisoners themselves. The organisation recognised the need to find out from the women themselves what issues were important to them. Imprisoned women often are

¹ Rate of incarceration per 100,000 population.

² A 2005 crime victimisation survey found that among victims of robbery 79% indicated that the perpetrator was a male, and among victims of an assault 77% indicated that the perpetrator was a male.

³ In 2007 57% of men in an Australian prison had a known prior imprisonment, while only 48.7% of women had a prior imprisonment.

⁴ This was found in the current study of a representative sample of 70 female prisoners across the state.

a gestalt of problems, each of which needs focus and attention in the prison context, which isn't adequately addressed by looking at women as an aggregate like in the surveys. The limitations of the previous approach were as follows:

- **Inappropriately Reductionistic:** The survey sought to turn what would be very complex and contextual responses into simple variables that bore little resemblance to the original response.
- **Dealing in Aggregates:** In corrections we are concerned with individuals, the merits of aggregating the characteristics and comparing them against some sort of theoretical 'normal' person has limited utility. In this context the quantitative approach alone may be too simplistic and may not reflect the real variations and combinations of characteristics; greater explanatory power may be gained through using qualitative data.
- **Limited Outputs:** Partly because of the approach, partly because of the sheer quantity of data collected, the surveys produced very little in the way of descriptive information, useful series of data, findings, and feedback. The main output was limited to being a statistical report put together by researchers.

The impact of these limitations was that that survey was restricted in its capacity to affect service development and delivery; the value of the research for the organisation was limited.

Method

These limitations, along with a desire for more in-depth and contextual information about women's offending and their lives in prison, and a desire to continuously evaluate the research process led to the current approach. The methodological solution chosen to address these issues was a concurrent nested mixed methods design (Cresswell, 2003, p. 218) with an emphasis on the collection of qualitative data. This allowed for the most effective collection of qualitative information, which could then later be broken down into categories, simulating the survey approach, with a data extraction process.

A semi-structured interview was designed, utilising the main themes from the previous surveys and some other variables of interest. Along with the questions, interviewers were supplied with a variety of prompts and probes to facilitate responding, and were encouraged to be as flexible as possible with the format in order to create an informal atmosphere for the interview, and to facilitate the participant's free responding. Most of the interviews took place at Bandyup, in the assessments centre, an area where the women are commonly called. This assured that other women in the prison had no way of knowing who was participating thus enhancing the anonymity provided to the participant. The women were called up and asked if they'd like to participate in an interview about their experience of coming to prison, with an emphasis on the fact that the interview was voluntary and confidential. In most cases the interviews occurred during the women's work time, the low refusal rate might be attributed to this. This more active means of eliciting participation meant that potentially, women who would not have responded to a written request to participate and make a time to talk to an interviewer, participated in the interview. Making participation easy and convenient for the women, and not taking up their personal time maximises the opportunity for women to become involved, particularly women less positively disposed to researchers.

The sample was randomly selected using a process called stratified sample with replacements, where the randomised sample is proportionate to the population on a number of sampling stratum, key characteristics thought to be important in the heterogeneity of the sample as a whole, resulting in relatively homogenous groups when separated out. The key strata identified in the population were identified as ethnicity, age, area, security level, and imprisonment status. The stratified sampling approach is often a better choice than random sampling because it prevents disproportionate sampling of groups within the population. In the current context this is particularly important because of variations in responding based on strata; namely the high rates of refusals to participate from higher security women and Aboriginal women. Normally a replacement for a participant would come randomly, meaning that these groups would likely be underrepresented in the final sample, but using stratified sampling with replacements means that a demographically representative participant would be used to replace the person who had decided not to participate. The downside of this process is of course related to its administrative intensity, and of course is predicated on the assumption that the stratum chosen were related to the heterogeneity of the sample.

Through the TOMS (Total Offender Management System) the Department of Corrective Services collects and stores information gained through entry and assessment interviews with offenders, court documents and police databases. This information allowed us in some cases to short-cut the collection of basic demographic information, while also allowing us to enhance the overall validity of the data through the triangulation of the information provided to us through the interviews with the women.

Triangulation

A rather unique feature of the current study is the availability of additional information to the self-report of participants through information from the Corrective Services database. Information from the interviews were complimented and contrasted with information from TOMS, which contains information from the participant's pre-sentence report, police records, initial interview on intake, and various assessments. Originally the plan was to use the official information as a way of short cutting the collection of some of the more basic data from participants, but over time the official records began to serve an important role in triangulating the data and filling in parts of the story that were missing.

The thing that first struck us was the honesty, forthrightness, and sense of responsibility demonstrated by the participants; all were very straight up about their crimes, and shared with us their thoughts on why they offended, their personal circumstances, and how they thought they could reduce their chances of coming back. Serious offenders seemed to be particularly forthright; perhaps because of the term of their sentences, they accept prison as their reality rather than as an experience to endure. Triangulation of the interviews seems to support this, with surprisingly few misrepresenting their crimes or circumstances as far as official records could discern. A few cases were identified where the official records differed significantly from the participant's interview:

- One case involved a woman stating that she had been put in prison for capturing a man who called at her house, threatening him with a gun, and tying him up. Official records indicated no such charges against that person; I put the story down to trying to 'impress the company'.
- Sadly I found a few cases where the women seemed to be unaware of exactly what they had done to be put in prison, particularly among the Aboriginal women from remote areas. They mentioned some of the things they had done, some of which were related to previous sentences, but seemed unaware of what they were being imprisoned for this particular time. This was particularly prevalent among rural Aboriginal women imprisoned because of default of fine or the breach of an order. One metropolitan based non-Aboriginal participant indicated that she had been arrested "for drugs"; however her charge sheet indicated that she had been charged with driving offences, she was evidently under the influence of drugs during the offence, but she had not been sentenced for a drug offence for more than 3 years.
- Unfortunately in at least one case the discrepancy seemed to result from the interviewer leading the participant. In one case the participant paused after being asked about why she was in prison, and slowly started to respond evidently with great emotion about having killed her partner. The interviewer probed the participant if the crime was in self defence and the participant quickly agreed saying she was trying to leave her partner at the time. However, the police report indicated that she had left a party in jealous rage, had found a knife, and had returned and stabbed her partner in a scuffle. With only the interview, a researcher may have concluded that it was yet another abused woman fighting back, where as her extensive serious assault record and police records indicate that she was the initiating agent in the wounding of her partner that resulted in his death.
- In a very small number of cases the participant misrepresented what they had done mostly by omission rather than straight out lying. Most of these cases were classic 'impression management' both in managing the interviewer's

perceptions and the subject's own self-perception. In one case the woman said she had been arrested for her more minor offence, default of fine, while neglecting to mention that the default of fine had come to light as a result of her being arrested for assault and obstruction of justice. In another case the participant had neglected to mention that the victim of her armed robbery was her mother, against whom she had significant resentment.

Triangulation of the information provided from the interviews exposed a few inconsistencies in responses from participants. In the current study, in addition to having the voluntary nature of the interview pointed out to potential participants, it was also emphasised that if they were not comfortable with a particular question it would be fine to simply ask to go to the next question. Prison participants are a vulnerable population, it is within their rights to misrepresent their crimes, lives and circumstances; we cannot obligate them to tell the truth. While the best situation is for participants to see the value in being truthful to researchers, some will always practice image management, partly because of the asymmetrical power relationship between the researcher and participant, the unfamiliarity of the researcher in the setting. Also some offenders have difficulty coping with the reality of what they did, and will embed their reasoning in their own more favourable perspective of events because of the distress involved in confronting reality. Having official records available in this study has made its great usefulness apparent. Where available official records supplement and add to the validity of participant responding; it is worth going to some effort to obtain.

Conclusion

In summing up, I'd like to share what I have learned through this research:

Never Undervalue a Direct Explanation in Research and Evaluation: The previous surveys had stagnated because the survey results lacked the capacity to have any sort of explanatory power. Quantitative research and qualitative research serve very different functions, and have different assumptions and requirements. Despite its much maligned history qualitative research is very good at translating experiences into data. While the current study employed both methods, the lynchpin was in having direct explanations and experiences as a part of the data. It is easy to get lost in mountains of numbers and to be seduced by the idea that if only you could collect enough data, you could know the truth of something, however it is better to get 'the truth' of the thing directly from your participants. This contextualisation then becomes a foundation upon which meaningful quantitative inquiry can be built.

Minimise the Cost of Participation and Value Prisoners' Time: In designing prison research a common assumption is that prisoners will participate as they have nothing better to do. This is incorrect; prisoners have jobs, study, hobbies, and social lives and a very limited set of time available to engage in these. Therefore it is important to make the most of the time they provide and the data obtained from your time with them. The Department has a policy that incentives for prisoners to participate in research is not allowed, so all that can be done is to minimise the cost of participation for the prisoner, which in our case meant having the interviews during their work time without them losing their pay for the time they spent with us. While it is important to have your participants see the value and importance of your study, and to make them feel that you value their input, it is unfair to make a prisoner think that your project can change their life when most of the time it won't. The best that can be done is to minimise the costs for the prisoner and the value their participation by making the most of the data provided.

"Not another Survey": While survey research can be a precise tool that can produce meaningful and generalisable results, Western Australian prisoners are a group that are vastly over-surveyed. It is a research project in itself to look at the potential effects of this, but it will suffice to say that prisoners will not 'strongly agree' with the statement that they will give their full attention to another survey. The antidote to this is to allow prisoners to tell their stories and to have them participate in a more open and unstructured format while still addressing the questions of interest. Quantitative data can be obtained through a data extraction process similar to our study, or else by an interactive questioning process.

Triangulate Subjective Accounts Where Possible: As researchers/evaluators we should not be distressed about the fact that prisoners can misrepresent the truth of things. There is a major asymmetrical power relationship in even the most participatory prison research project. Misrepresenting allows a participant to feel better about talking to the strange person across from them, asking about the most intimate details of their lives (Image Management), and it allows them to insulate themselves from the reality of their crimes, minimising distress. Alternately, some participants may be mistaken about things that had happened, especially in terms of criminal justice procedures. The best way to deal with idealised, dramatised, or mistaken accounts is to

have multiple data sources that will alert the researcher to any obvious contradictions and to have a data analysis plan in place for the interpretation of the contradictions. The onus is on us to produce valid data, not on the participant.

Don't Be Too Suspicious of a Prisoners' Self Report: While this may seem like a contradiction to the previous point, the honesty and forthrightness of responses we got in our project cannot be understated. Particularly among the more serious offenders, we found them to be remarkably in touch with themselves, what they had done, and what had been done to them, and accordingly shared their story in a very matter of fact way. In proportion to the volume of responding in our study, the number of contradictions was actually quite small; mainly concerning the circumstances and nature of the crime the participant was imprisoned for.

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