



NORTH CAROLINA SENTENCING AND POLICY ADVISORY COMMISSION

RESEARCH BRIEF

April 2010

Female Prisoners and Recidivism in North Carolina

The North Carolina Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission is required, by statute, to conduct biennial studies on recidivism in the state, and report its findings to the General Assembly. The statistics and findings quoted in this paper are based on data collected for the Commission's 2010 report, "Correctional Program Evaluation: Offenders Placed on Probation or Released from Prison in Fiscal Year 2005/06," released on April 15, 2010.

The study sample included 60,824 offenders placed on probation or released from prison during FY 2005/06, and followed for a fixed three-year period to capture their recidivism. The primary recidivism measure discussed in this paper is fingerprinted rearrest.

Table 1 displays the sample by gender and type of punishment: 13,064, or 21.5% of the offenders were female, with 10,393 placed on probation (25.3% of all probationers) and 2,671 (13.5% of all prisoners) released from prison. By far the largest group of female offenders (8,288 or 63.4%) was sentenced to community punishment.

Table 2 profiles the sample, and compares some personal characteristics of female and male offenders. Over 45% of the female offenders were black, 14.5% were married, 47.3% had a twelve-year education, their mean age was 32, and 37% had an identified substance abuse problem.¹ Notably, a higher proportion of female offenders in the sample had 12 or more years of education (47.3% versus 37.4%), and a lower proportion of female offenders were at high risk of recidivism (2.1% versus 12.7%) when compared to male offenders. Focusing on female prisoners only, a considerably larger proportion had substance abuse issues (71.3%) than any of the other female or male subgroups. As noted in Table 2 and further demonstrated in Table 3, a consistently higher proportion of both female probationers and prisoners were low risk level (75.1% and 43%, respectively), and a lower proportion were high risk level (1.1% and 6.1%, respectively), when compared to males.

The majority of female offenders in the sample (64%) were convicted of misdemeanors as their most serious offense, while only 1.5% were convicted of a violent felony (offense classes B1-

¹ For purposes of this study, probationers with a self-reported, affirmative response to having a history of substance abuse problems on the risk assessment and/or sanctioned at sentencing to a substance abuse program (*e.g.*, Drug Treatment Court, DART-Cherry) were identified as having a substance abuse problem. For prisoners, a score of three or higher on the Chemical Dependency Screening Test (CDST), the Short Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test (SMAST), or the Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory (SASSI) at any time during the inmate's incarceration period, but typically at intake, was used to determine a substance abuse problem.

E).² (See Table 4.) Of the 2,671 female prison releases, 32.7% were misdemeanants and 4.8% were violent felons.

Fifty-eight percent of the prison releases were identified as having a substance abuse problem, 27.6% a mental health problem,³ and 67.4% either or both types of problems (see Table 5). The percentage of female prisoners with substance abuse problems was 71.3%, with mental health problems was 53.7%, and with either or both types of problems was 82.9% -- higher in each of these categories than that of male prisoners. When controlling for offense of conviction, violent female prisoners (classes B1-E) had the highest rates of mental health issues (86.8%) and females convicted of classes F-I felonies or misdemeanors had the highest rate of substance abuse problems (71.9%). Overall, 82.9% of female prisoners compared to 64.9% of male prisoners had a substance abuse problem, a mental health problem, or both.

Recidivism rates, whether measured as rearrest, reconviction, or reincarceration, were consistently and significantly lower for female probationers and prison releases than for their male counterparts (see Table 6). The overall rearrest rate for females was 28.5% during the three-year follow up, compared to 43.3% for males. Close to 40 percent of female prisoners and 51.6% of male prisoners were rearrested in the three-year period, with a comparable gap in the rates for female and male probationers (25.6% and 38.6%, respectively).

Table 7 examines rearrest rates by gender, while controlling for offender risk level. Gender differences in the rate of rearrest virtually disappeared for low-risk offenders; medium-risk female offenders were slightly less likely to be rearrested than their male counterparts. This finding was also true for high-risk female prisoners; however, high-risk female offenders (and especially female probationers) had higher rates of rearrest than males.

The rate of infractions was also measured for sample prisoners, as an interim indicator of problem behavior. Figure 1 shows that more than two-third of the female prisoners had no infractions and only 6.7% had five or more infractions, compared to 52.8% of the male prisoners with no infractions, and 12% of them with five or more.

In summary, the 2,671 female inmates in the sample released from prison during FY 2005/06 constitute a distinct subgroup within the sample of all offenders. Forty-four percent of the women were black, 14.5% were married, 33.7% had twelve years of education or more, and their average age was 34. Forty-three percent of them were at low risk of reoffending and six percent were at high risk. More than half of the female prisoners had mental health problems, 71.3% -- the highest percent of any group -- had a substance abuse problem, and 82.9% had mental health problems, substance abuse problems, or both. Approximately one-third of the female prisoners were convicted of a misdemeanor as their most serious offense, 62.5% had a class F-I felony conviction, and 4.8% were convicted of violent (class B1-E) felonies.

² As required by law, all prisoners convicted of a Class B1-E felony are released onto a nine-month period of post-release supervision. The study sample included 129 female offenders on post-release supervision.

³ Prisoners were identified as having a mental health problem if their most serious Pulheat mental health score during the period of incarceration was two or greater, or if they received a DSM-IV mental illness diagnosis from DOP mental health services during the current period of incarceration.

While in prison, females had a lower rate of infractions than males, although part of the difference might be accounted for by shorter average sentences served by women. The three-year rearrest rate for female prisoners was significantly lower than that for male prisoners – 39.6% and 51.6%, respectively. This difference, while not disappearing, was considerably reduced when controlling for the risk level of male and female prisoners, indicating that while gender made a difference, a more important correlate of reoffending was the offender risk score. The twelve percent difference in recidivism rates between female and male prisoners is mostly due to the higher rate of females with low risk scores and their lower rate with high scores. In general, female prisoners were convicted of less serious crimes than male prisoners, had lower risk scores, and were less likely to be rearrested. The primary area of concern, based on the analysis of available data, pointed to treatment needs to address the high incidence of mental health and substance abuse problems of female prisoners.

**Table 1
Type of Punishment by Gender**

Type of Punishment	Gender			
	Female		Male	
	#	%	#	%
Probation Entries				
Community Punishment	8,288	63.4	20,357	42.6
Intermediate Punishment	2,105	16.1	10,341	21.7
Subtotal	10,393	79.5	30,698	64.3
Prison Releases				
No Post-Release Supervision	2,542	19.5	15,182	31.8
Post-Release Supervision	129	1.0	1,880	3.9
Subtotal	2,671	20.5	17,062	35.7
TOTAL	13,064	21.5	47,760	78.5

SOURCE: NC Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission, FY 2005/06 Correctional Program Evaluation Data

Table 2
Personal Characteristics by Type of Punishment: Female and Male Offenders

Type of Punishment	N	% Black	Mean Age	% Married	% With Twelve Years of Education or More	% With Substance Abuse	% With High Risk Score
Probation Entries							
Female	10,393	45.5	31.4	14.5	51.2	28.2	1.1
Male	30,698	49.6	30.2	14.1	41.5	31.6	8.0
Probation Subtotal	41,091	48.6	30.5	14.2	43.9	30.7	6.3
Prison Releases							
Female	2,671	44.1	34.2	14.5	33.7	71.3	6.1
Male	17,062	58.7	32.6	12.8	30.5	56.0	21.2
Prison Subtotal	19,733	56.7	32.9	13.1	30.9	58.1	19.1
All Offenders by Gender							
Female	13,064	45.2	32.0	14.5	47.3	37.0	2.1
Male	47,760	52.9	31.1	13.6	37.4	40.3	12.7
TOTAL	60,824	51.2	31.3	13.8	39.4	39.6	10.4

Note: There are missing values for self-reported years of education.

SOURCE: NC Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission, FY 2005/06 Correctional Program Evaluation Data

Table 3
Offender Risk Level by Type of Punishment: Female and Male Offenders

Type of Punishment	N	% Low	% Medium	% High
Probation Entries				
Female	10,393	75.1	23.8	1.1
Male	30,698	41.3	50.7	8.0
Probation Subtotal	41,091	49.8	43.9	6.3
Prison Releases				
Female	2,671	43.0	50.9	6.1
Male	17,062	21.4	57.5	21.1
Prison Subtotal	19,733	24.3	56.6	19.1
All Offenders by Gender				
Female	13,064	68.5	29.4	2.1
Male	47,760	34.2	53.1	12.7
TOTAL	60,824	41.6	48.0	10.4

SOURCE: NC Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission, FY 2005/06 Correctional Program Evaluation Data

Table 4
Offense Class for Most Serious Current Conviction by Type of Punishment:
Female and Male Offenders

Type of Punishment	N	% With Prior Arrest	Offense Class for Current Conviction		
			% B1-E Felony	% F-I Felony	% Misd
Probation Entries					
Female	10,326	55.0	0.6	27.3	72.1
Male	30,448	66.3	1.4	36.7	61.9
Probation Subtotal	40,774	63.4	1.2	34.4	64.4
Prison Releases					
Female	2,671	88.4	4.8	62.5	32.7
Male	17,062	90.5	11.0	64.5	24.5
Prison Subtotal	19,733	90.2	10.2	64.3	25.5
All Offenders by Gender					
Female	12,997	61.8	1.5	34.5	64.0
Male	47,510	74.9	4.9	46.7	48.4
TOTAL	60,507	72.1	4.1	44.1	51.8

Note: Of the 60,824 offenders in the FY 2005/06 sample, 317 were excluded from this table due to discrepant or unknown offense classes. Due to the length of sentences imposed for Class B1 felonies, there were no prisoners released in the FY 2005/06 sample with a most serious conviction for a Class B1 felony.

SOURCE: NC Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission, FY 2005/06 Correctional Program Evaluation Data

Table 5
Substance Abuse and/or Mental Health Problems by Offense Class for
Most Serious Current Convictions: Female and Male Prisoners

Offense Class for Most Serious Current Convictions	N	Average Time Served (Months)	% With Substance Abuse Problem	% With Mental Health Problem	% With Substance Abuse OR Mental Health Problem
Class B1 – E Felonies					
Female	129	48.5	58.9	86.8	91.5
Male	1,880	56.6	51.9	46.1	72.0
Subtotal	2,009	56.1	52.3	48.7	73.3
Class F – I Felonies and Misdemeanors					
Female	2,542	7.0	71.9	52.0	82.5
Male	15,182	9.7	56.6	20.8	64.1
Subtotal	17,724	9.3	58.8	25.2	66.7
All Prisoners by Gender					
Female	2,671	9.0	71.3	53.7	82.9
Male	17,062	14.8	56.0	23.6	64.9
TOTAL	19,733	14.0	58.1	27.6	67.4

Note: Under Structured Sentencing, prisoners released with a most serious offense for Class B1 through Class E felonies are released on post-release supervision for a period of nine months, with the exception of sex offenders who are supervised for five years.

SOURCE: NC Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission, FY 2005/06 Correctional Program Evaluation Data

Table 6
Criminal Justice Outcome Measures: Female and Male Offenders

Type of Punishment	N	Criminal Justice Outcome Measures During the Three-Year Follow-Up Period		
		% Rearrest	% Reconviction	% Reincarceration
Probation Entries				
Female	10,393	25.6	15.4	17.2
Male	30,698	38.6	25.3	30.8
Probation Subtotal	41,091	35.4	22.8	27.3
Prison Releases				
Female	2,671	39.6	26.2	26.8
Male	17,062	51.6	35.9	37.2
Prison Subtotal	19,733	50.0	34.6	35.8
All Offenders by Gender				
Female	13,064	28.5	17.6	19.1
Male	47,760	43.3	29.1	33.1
TOTAL	60,824	40.1	26.6	30.1

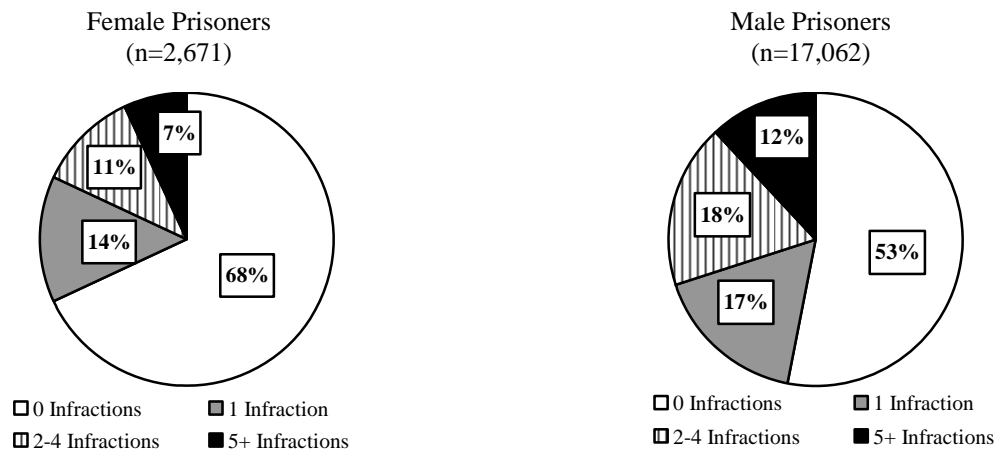
SOURCE: NC Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission, FY 2005/06 Correctional Program Evaluation Data

Table 7
Rearrest Rates by Offender Risk Level: Female and Male Offenders

Type of Punishment	N	% Rearrest by Offender Risk Level During the Three-Year Follow-Up Period		
		Low	Medium	High
Probation Entries				
Female	10,393	19.4	42.7	85.0
Male	30,698	21.1	47.5	73.1
Probation Subtotal	41,091	20.4	46.8	73.6
Prison Releases				
Female	2,671	23.0	49.6	73.2
Male	17,062	24.9	52.5	76.0
Prison Subtotal	19,733	24.4	52.2	75.9
All Offenders by Gender				
Female	13,064	19.9	45.1	78.0
Male	47,760	21.9	49.4	74.8
TOTAL	60,824	21.2	48.9	74.9

SOURCE: NC Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission, FY 2005/06 Correctional Program Evaluation Data

Figure 1
Number of Infractions During Incarceration



SOURCE: NC Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission, FY 2005/06 Correctional Program Evaluation Data