

# Recent Research Findings on Probation and Parole Agent Strategies to Support Women's Desistance

A 6 YEAR STUDY OF 402 MICHIGAN WOMEN AND THEIR SUPERVISING AGENTS

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A workshop for the 2016 meeting of the ICCA, Toronto

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Funding for the 6 years of qualitative and quantitative research, extensive cooperation of MDOC

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## Team of Investigators

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Expertise:  
Women Offenders  
Gender & Crime  
Mixture of Qualitative & Quantitative Methods

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Professor of Psychology

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4 Structure of the talk

- Overview of the research
- Findings from part I
  - Agent communication style and women's responses
  - Communication style and relationship style
  - Memorable messages from agents to women
  - Supportive communication
- Findings from part II Women's identity development and desistance
- Other findings and information sources re: the study

ASK QUESTIONS PROVIDE INSIGHTS ENGAGE IN DISCUSSION

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5 Goal: go beyond knowledge from other people's research

- Assess needs that are related to recidivism and for the high risk women, address them through supervision. (Compass, RNR model, WRNA)
- Focus only on the needs that predict recidivism
  - OR
  - include the needs that are relevant to women, their crime, and agent concerns (the working alliance)
- Develop a supportive relationship that involves trust, fairness, caring; avoid a punitive ("tough") relationship

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6 Two 3 YEAR STUDIES over 6 years

- STUDY 1: What does communication from the supervising agent have to do with outcomes? Other explanations of outcomes?
- STUDY 2: How is a woman's identity development related to her outcomes?

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### Points of data collection

- Initial data from each of 73 agents
- 3 months after the start of supervision, the initial interview with 402 women
- 3 months later interview and survey of woman and agent; and 6 months later interview with women(N=379)
- About 2 years pass –  
Another interview with all women (~ 300)  
Reassess key needs and risks and strengths for all  
Identify development (life stories) questions for 120 women with most serious prior criminal histories  
A year later, another final interview – we are in the middle of this now.

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### Our methods

- A combination of data types -- qualitative and quantitative
- A combination of data sources – supervising agents, records of violations for 18 months, official criminal history and recidivism to 42 months, in-depth interviews with the women in person and on the phone, in the community, in prisons/treatment/jails
  - Study 1: T1, T2, T3 Retained 379
  - Study 2: T4 (phone), T5 (life history in person for highest risk women), T6 (phone) Retaining about 300, still looking.

**TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF QUALITATIVE DATA CONTAINING NUMEROUS EXAMPLES OF COMMUNICATION FROM THE AGENT THAT WOMEN HEARD, AND WHAT THEY THOUGHT OF IT.**

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### Who are the women?

- ¼ probation, ¼ parole; substance-involved
- Race/Ethnicity
  - 49% White, 36.6% Black; 11% multiple racial group memberships. Many reported being Hispanic
  - Urban, suburban, rural mix
- Risk of Recidivism: 22% Low, 49% Medium, 29% High
- 85% annual income under \$10,000
- Almost all women who feel they need alcohol or drug treatment receive it
- High proportions of women not receiving medical insurance/care, education/training programs, cash assistance but feel they need it

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WRNA assessed need

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Type of Need	% and N
Education	17.9% (72)
Employment/Financial	75.6% (304)
Safe Housing	9.2% (37)
Mental Illness	54.0% (217)
Child Abuse	52.7% (212)
Adult Abuse	55.2% (222)
Substance Abuse History	54.0% (217)
Substance Abuse Current	16.4% (66)
Total N	402

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Questions about what data we have and how we obtained it? How we found the women? Why they let us interview them?

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Study 1 Communication



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### Some things we measured from women and agents –Part I of study

- WRNA to assess needs, strengths, and risks and examine change over time
- Participation/engagement in substance abuse treatment
- Need for and receipt of social welfare benefits, mental health and substance abuse treatment
- Woman and agent assessment of the communication pattern the agent uses and the nature of the agent-client relationship.
- Woman's response (anxiety, self-efficacy in specific areas, reactance) to talking with the agent
- Neighborhood crime

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### Qualitative data we collected – Part I of study

- Agent reports of the messages they wanted to send women in general and each client in particular
- Women's reports of the memorable messages they received from the supervising agent.
- Women's descriptions of the content of the agent's discussion of areas of need and risk, regardless of whether they thought they had the need.
- Women's descriptions of what they were doing to improve their lives.

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### What is communication and what did we want to know about it?

- How do **conversation and conformity conversational communication style** affect women?
- How are **communication and relationship style** (supportive vs. punitive) related to each other? Does a supportive relationship style matter?
- What **memorable messages** do women offenders remember and find helpful?
- What constitutes **supportive communication** in the probation/parole context? Do women find it helpful?

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16 Finding 1 from Study 1  
communication style

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17 Communication style

- Conversational Style  
– encourages open communication on a variety of topics
- Conformity Style  
– reflects obedience to authority

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18 Items to reflect a conversational vs. conformity communication style

- Conversational  
When I talk with (Client Name Here), we often talk about things where she and I disagree.  
I frequently ask (Client Name Here) her opinions when we are talking
- Conformity  
Sometimes I say to (Client Name Here) something like, "my ideas are right and you should not question them."  
Sometimes it is necessary to tell (Client Name Here) something like, "a person under supervision should not argue with the PO or the judge."

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19 Possible short-term effects of communication style

- Self-efficacy  
the belief in being able to achieve one's personal desired outcomes (In this case, avoid drug use)
- Reactance  
perception that being able to think, feel, or act freely in the way that one desires is being threatened.
- Restoration  
acting to counteract threats to freedoms (doing the opposite of what told to do)

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20 Effects of communication style on indicators of continued substance use

- Conversational style → higher self-efficacy to avoid drug use + lower reactance → lower self-reported substance use and fewer violations (18 months)
- Conformity communication → lower self-efficacy to avoid drug use + increased reactance → higher self-reported use and more violations (18 months)

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21 Examples of reactance and self-efficacy (quantitative scale items)

**Reactance** "I get very irritated when my PO tells me what I must or must not do;"  
"Often I lose enthusiasm for doing something just because my PO expects me to do it."

**Self-efficacy** to avoid a criminal lifestyle  
"Talking with my PO makes me more certain that I can avoid people and situations that trigger my drug or heavy alcohol use."

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### An example of reactance and restoration

Interviewer: So, what did your PO have to say....

Participant: She says that basically she'll lock me up. They do have a place in [state prison]. I told her I'd never been there. She said "Well, keep it up, you'll go." Basically because she said, you know, "Using is against the law. You're breaking the law when you use ... buy crack, smoke crack. And if you keep dropping dirty, you go on to prison. No. If you abscond, don't come in, I'm sending you to prison."

Interviewer: Okay, so did it make things better for you?

Participant: Got high.

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### Ways to reduce reactance

- identifying and stating some similarities between POs and offenders (e.g., both are single parents)
- ending the conversation by stating that offender still has the freedom to choose her actions (motivational interviewing)
- forewarn the offender that what she is about to hear may seem to restrict the offender's freedoms, but there are reasons not to ignore the message
- testimonials, narrative messages, and humor – distraction from irritation (cognitively busy)

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### Practical application

- Using a conversational communication style in which you supply offenders with information, referrals, and support may increase offenders' self-efficacy to avoid drugs and decrease reactance and drug and alcohol use and violations.
- Using a conformity community style by using orders and threats may lower self-efficacy to avoid drugs and alcohol and increase violations.

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### Finding 2 from Study 1

the contribution of communication style to the nature of the agent-client relationship

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### Items to reflect supportive vs. punitive relationship style (Quantitative Scale Items)

- Supportive
  - I want [client] to feel free to discuss the things that worry her
  - I really care about her concerns
  - I encourage her to work together with me
- Punitive
  - I feel it is sometimes necessary to punish [client]
  - [Client] feels I make unreasonable demands on her
  - Sometimes it is not possible to talk to [client] without talking down to her

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### Which type of relationship?

"She is a real likable personality like a regular person who really cares about me. She's not a goody goody either. My present PO is really concerned and nice - but still very stern and firm - really good! In the past they have been harsh and cold, and there has been no follow up. When I was in jail or treatment [past POs] were glad I was out of their hair for a while and were impossible to reach."

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### Effect of communication style and content on relationships between agent and client

- Communication
  - Conversational style that encourages open communication on a variety of topics
    - Talk about needs women identifies
  - Conformity style that reflects obedience to authority
- Relationship
  - Supportive (trust, fair, caring)
  - Punitiveness (tough)

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Does not hold for women with most serious criminal histories (agents and women agree)

Talk about needs the woman identifies

supportive, fair, caring

Extensive criminal history: Why does this not hold?

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### The Motivational Interviewing Literature may Provide the Answer

- Our measure of discussion of problems considers just 6 months
- Principle of motivational interviewing:
  - Prioritize goals through shared decision-making, especially when there are multiple goals.
  - Emphasize building effective coping skills to achieve a few goals rather than focusing on the full range of goals.
  - Address multiple goals in sequence over time.

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### Does a supportive relationship matter?

- We are not seeing a clear connection to recidivism -- still looking
- Women **low** in **Antisocial Attitudes, Antisocial Friends, Anger/Hostility, and Depression/Anxiety** at the start of supervision had higher reactance and lower self efficacy to avoid crime when their agents used a punitive style of relationship
- Women **high** in these characteristics had lower reactance and higher self efficacy when their agents used a supportive style.

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### Finding 3 from Study 1

memorable messages

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### Memorable messages

- Verbal messages remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives
- Precisely recall message word-for-word
- Memorable messages are one key in the self-assessment of personal behavior that exceeds or falls below personal standards, and therefore they can stimulate behavior change

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34. My memorable message, your memorable message, a client's memorable message

This message comes to mind when:  
 She does something of which she is proud  
 She avoids doing something she would later regret  
 She does something of which she is not proud  
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35. Do women have memorable messages from an agent?

- 162 (40.3%) women reported at least one memorable message from their PO
- Greater proportion of women on parole (52%) recalled message than women on probation (37%)
  - Leaner social networks? More contact?

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36. When do women think of memorable messages?

Women recalled memorable messages when they did something they were proud of such as:

- Routine activities, such as doing day-to-day tasks
- Goal fulfillment, such as going back to school
- Not giving into urges, such as staying away from drugs/alcohol

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Type of Message	Example	Percent
<b>Behavioral advice</b> Instructions for what the woman should or should not do	"[She told me to] Keep my nose clean."	35%
<b>Motivation</b> Encouraging words	"As long as I put my mind to it, I can do it."	15%
<b>Personal compliment/praise</b> Statements about her progress or qualities the woman possesses that make her special	"I don't fit in with the criminals."	14%
<b>Motivation &amp; behavioral advice</b> Encourages a woman and gives her specific instructions for what to do or not do	"Don't give up, don't lose faith, just keep doing it."	12%
<b>Negative personal statement</b> Comments about the woman's actions, character, or past that are pessimistic	"Every time you take two steps forward you take four steps back. You're always setting yourself up for failure."	11%
<b>Negative personal statement &amp; behavioral advice</b> Pessimistic comments and instructions for what the woman should or should not do	"She don't think I can do it and I'll have to prove to her I can."	5%
<b>Personal compliment &amp; behavioral advice</b> Compliments the woman and has instructions for what to do or not do	"She told me she was very proud of me and stay on the right path."	4%
<b>Motivation &amp; personal compliment</b> Encourages a woman and praises her character at the same time	"That I can do it, that I'm a good person, and a good mom."	2%

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- ### When do women recall memorable messages from agents?
- When they did something they were proud of like doing day-to-day tasks, going back to school, giving in to urges to use drugs
  - When messages stopped them from doing something they would later regret like giving into urges, such as avoiding drugs
  - When they did something they were not proud of like relapsing or having dirty drops

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### A Memorable Message

I just remember that she told me that, like after I was on for like six months, she said she was really proud of me. She said, "Everybody in this office thought you were going to fail, nobody wanted you for a probationer. Not to be mean, but just with your substance abuse history everybody thought you were going to screw up and be right back in jail." She just said "I want you to know that I'm really proud of you." Stuff like that. That was cool.

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### Effects of memorable messages

- Now I think about, "I'm not going to just disappoint my family and friends, it's going to disappoint her too." Cause like I really think she cares.
- Yeah, it impacts my decisions. It has came up that "wow, I want to use." You know, her... she's in the back of my mind too, besides just me and my family.
- When I did have the dirty drop. I thought "oh my gosh, she was just telling me how proud she was of me and then I went and did this."

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### How women connect messages to feelings and behavior

- Behavioral advice messages often made women feel proud for not giving into urges ("I stayed out of trouble and didn't get high").
- Women who reported receiving motivation memorable messages were more likely to stop themselves from committing suicide \*("The message) stopped me from committing suicide") and doing things that would inhibit their goal fulfillment.
- Women whose memorable messages were negative personal statements tended to stop themselves from giving into urges.

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### Finding 4 from Study 1

supportive communication

Additional authors: Amanda Holmstrom, Ph.D. and Beth Adams, Grad Assistant

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Many women offenders lack social support, supportive communication provides it

- Emotional support helpful for women deciding what to do about an unplanned pregnancy, esteem support most helps women taking action.
- Information support helped sex-workers increase self-efficacy and use condoms, emotional support led to their seeking health care.
- Experienced counselors used a wide variety of types of supportive communication, but counselors in training did not.

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4 types of supportive communication  
#1 Informational

- Suggest/advise: "She told me not to hang out with people who smoke or drink, because I don't want to smoke or drink. So why be around it, if I ain't got to?" (23% of women)
- Referral: "She like gave me like a list of places that I could go if I wanted like ...for meetings in the area or whatever like that." (36% of women)
- Reassess or redefine the situation: "She sat me down and asked me, "Why? What triggered you to use?" So definitely, she talked to me. (3% of women)
- Teaching: "She showed me how to get to the program, and showed me how to walk right back to the parole office and where I was, and told me that if I wanted to switch parole to a different city, I could." (.5% of women)

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4 types of supportive communication  
#2 Esteem

- Compliment: "And once I complete and everything, she [the PO] be like, 'I'm proud of you. You do good and you stay good, and you stay on the right track.' So that's how she do." (8 % of women)
- Validation: "I told her I was gonna do the Substance Abuse Dual-Diagnosis Program, and she was glad about it." (4% of women)
- Relief of blame: *not used.*

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### 4 types of supportive communication #3 Tangible

- Performs a task to alleviate stress: "And she advocated for me, you know, she called him and spoke to him about what she didn't think this was the way to go. I really appreciated it because I mean if I don't think I'm ready, I shouldn't be forced." (2.5 % of women)
- Willingness to help: "She told me if I ever, like, had a problem or relapsed or went back to let her know, right way and she would assist me in like fining treatment or things like that I guess." (5% of women)

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### 4 types of supportive communication #4 Emotional

- Stress the importance of closeness: "She asks me questions and you can tell she kinda cares, you know what I mean? She's not waiting for me to mess up." (8% of women)
- Understanding/Empathy: "Pretty well, she's like related like personal experiences with mine, so that's kind of nice." (3% of women)
- Listening: "She listens to what my options are, what I think I should do." (1% of women)
- Sympathy and listening: "I just walked straight over there and I sat in her cubicle for like 10, 15 minutes. I cried and you know, I feel close to her. I feel like I can go to her with anything, she's there to listen and help in any way she can." (less than 1 % of women note sympathy)

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### Would other types of supportive communication be helpful?

- Threats
- Reminders of consequences
- Other types of supportive communication

■ Or do referrals provide the other types of support?

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### Benefits of supportive communication

- Behavioral: "I stopped getting high."
- Psychological: "I feel a lot better about myself. I feel more confident about my self-esteem's higher, so I thank her for a lot of that."
- Relational: "I know that she's trying to help me work on something that I realize I have a problem and I want to seek help with it, and she's willing to help with it."

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### Questions about communication research?

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### Study 2 Identity development



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### Some things we measured from women- Part 2 of study

- WRNA to assess selected needs, strengths, and risks and examine change over time
- Participation in substance abuse treatment
- Need for and receipt of social welfare benefits, mental health and substance abuse treatment
- Satisfaction with life**
- Neighborhood crime
- Women's engagement in treatment
- Obamacare and medical access**
- Quantitative measure of generativity

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### Qualitative data we collected - Part 2 of study

- Women's descriptions of what they were doing to improve their lives.
- Description of the effects of not getting needed financial, housing, or other assistance.**
- For 120 high risk women, life histories that reveal their current identity**
- For the 120 high risk women, memorable messages**

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### What is narrative identity and what do we want to know about it?

- Contamination scripts, redemption scripts, future scripts, agency, generativity?**
- Barriers to positive identity development?**
- Identity and recidivism

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### The reason for studying identity

- Agent behaviors, communication, styles are not strong predictors of long-term recidivism.
- How do women act to improve their lives?
- Do women's exercise of agency differentiate those who comply with requirements of supervision? Do their goals and actions explain who avoids police contact and conviction?
- What does identity development have to do with outcomes?

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### Finding 1 about identity

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### Identity in the first year of supervision (Rebecca Stone on parolees)

Evidence of agency  
Redemption sequences – making good out of bad  
Prosocial future script  
Generativity  
Vs.  
Contamination – bad creates bad → new arrests

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### Contamination –

**Talking about Going Back to School –**  
 To be honest with you, I was just going back trying to set an example, role model [for her daughter]... with my record ... I really wanted to do like maybe ... X-ray tech or physical therapist, but with my record I knew I really couldn't go nowhere with it.

**Using her Certification to Repair Automobile Breaks—**  
 You know I never worked at a place, or anything like that. So, I mean my, my certification, I could do that if I want, you know if I really wanted to. And then you have to have your own tools. Like if I was to fill out some applications or anything like that, they require you have your own tools.

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### Agency

What have you done to make your life better [after 10 years in prison]?

I know I gotta get up in the morning, so at nighttime I prepare myself. I set my ... you know, everything I'm gonna do: take my shower, clothes, I set everything out, set up the alarms clock, get all the proper paperwork I need for that day and, you know, just pay attention to the bus schedule; what time the buses coming or whatever, you know, the times and stuff like that. I'm just on a routine, a very rigid routine and I'm driven. *[Laughs]*

I want to get off it (parole) *[laughs]*. I want to get my life back, all these people been in my life too long.

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### Redemption –

Got in touch with my "strong side," "with me" in prison, got rid of a "bad guy"

Yeah, it was always there because it was there before I even got into drugs so I knew what type of person that I was. I just fell short in the middle, yeah.

Refused to get back with her drug using husband.

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### Generativity

- I can be your mom but I can't go back to treat you for the years I wasn't there. I have to start from now to where you gonna go from here and I just was shaking her and shaking her .....
- So someday you're gonna see me as a motivational speaker telling my life and wanting to help others, especially this is a neighborhood where I got drugs and stuff, where I just started prostituting and ... this whole area, and I see some of the same girls that was there with me, and I see new ones.

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### Finding 2 about identity and illegal behavior

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### Comparison of no arrest/arrest groups

Short term shifts in identity – **downward spiral**

**The start of supervision:** was trying to correct the past, "do what's right," by no longer using, attending support meetings, "giv[ing] back to society" through volunteer work. Avoiding old friends and form new relationships

**3 months later:** humiliated when her parole officer called her a liar in front of everyone in the office lobby

**3 more months later:** had reoffended and reported feeling depressed and overwhelmed by her situation.

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Comparison of no arrest/arrest groups  
Short term shifts in identity – upward spiral

**Start of supervision:** expectation that she would reoffend when "backed into a corner" because "Who can live broke with no money?"

**3 months later:** struggling with thoughts about offending but was focused on "avoiding trouble."

**3 more months later:** staying clean, attending school, and spending more time with her family, and she looked forward to being released from supervision and being independent.

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Failures of **identity verification**

- Positive identity themes early on followed by failure of identity verification had more violations

"I go to school, I go look for jobs, and I'm going to counseling, and I attend AA. I don't understand what ... why everybody thinks so negative of me. Why does everybody always think I'm doing drugs? I know I used to do drugs but that doesn't mean I'm doing them now."

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**Identity verification** and resulting self-esteem to support prosocial self

PO says "I'm so proud of you, I'm so proud."

It's a positive effect. It's great; it's like a burst of energy. That self-esteem boost you need from her and from within. I haven't been in school because I didn't have the confidence to go back to school. Now I'm ready. You know, now I can sit down, read a book report, write a book report. I didn't have the self-esteem to make those moves. It gets your self-esteem up.

**CONNECTS BACK TO MEMORABLE MESSAGES**

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### Ongoing Analysis

- How do agents influence participation in treatment?
- What kind of supportive communication is in messages agents want to send and do send, and messages the women receive?
- Do motivations to be a good mother matter? (yes in good neighborhoods, no in bad)
- The number of drug related violations do not predict recidivism, but other technical violations do.
- Backgrounds and characteristics of women who use violence.
- MORE

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### Improving Supervision for Women Offenders

Goals of the Interdisciplinary ISWO research program:

- Improve understanding and efficacy of parole/probation supervision of women offenders
- Examine whether the style and content of supervision interactions predict women's recidivism and key related outcomes.
- Identify measurable dimensions of officers' interactions that best predict outcomes so that these can be taught in training and education programs

Contact Us at:  
 Email: [WIPP@msu.edu](mailto:WIPP@msu.edu)  
 Phone: 517-763-8596  
 Toll Free Number: 800-892-9051 FREE  
(This is the School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University Ask for Professor Henry or leave a message for her.)

Investigators | News | Presentations | Publications and Articles | Reports | Supported By

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### Also on the website

- [Women Offenders Perceptions of Treatment by Police and Courts](#)
- [Strategies to Avoid Victimization](#)
- [DOC Transportation Spring 2014 – Transportation Problems & Strategies](#)
- [Effects Of Agent Relationships](#)
- [A Brief Snapshot of Women on Probation and Parole in South Central Michigan](#)
- [Memorable Messages From Agents](#)
- [Staying Out of Trouble in Bad Neighborhoods](#)
- [Access to Crime Reducing Benefits Programs](#)
- [Nature of Relationships with Agents](#)

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### Contact Information

<http://cj.msu.edu/programs/improving-supervision-women-offenders/>

Tabs at the bottom take you to all reports, papers, etc.

Merry Morash, Ph.D., Professor  
Michigan State U.  
morashm@msu.edu

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### The end

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### Our website

<http://cj.msu.edu/programs/improving-supervision-women-offenders/>

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### Identification of 3 new needs

- The unfortunate "natural experiment" with welfare benefits  
loss→more risk; receipt→high risk
- Transportation access → longer time to conviction
- Strategies for making it in a high crime neighborhood –avoid people including family, stay home, avoid everyone, be with prosocial people (least used).

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### Types of change – some considered in this presentation(Year 1 and Year 4)

- Past and current identity narrative identity – making sense of past & current self to explain who you are; exercising agency to be who you want to be
- Change in the individual and her behavior (self esteem, drug use)
- Change in the context (e.g., neighborhood, safe housing, social network)
- Change in relationship to environment/resources (employment/financial need, receipt of financial benefits, receipt of treatment, educational services, experiences during supervision)

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### What changes in the Michigan context?

First 9 months of supervision

**Decreases** in unsafe living environment, antisocial friends, anger/hostility, mental illness symptoms, substance use, family conflict, negative relationships

**Increases** in self esteem

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### Memorable Message Examples

- You control your life, it don't control you.
- If you stay around productive and positive people, they will support you down the road.
- If it come too easy, it ain't right.
- Take time to get adjusted to your new situation (out of prison)
- Have confidence in yourself. Don't let anybody get you down.
- No matter how bad you got it, somebody has it worse than you.
- Have a nice day.

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