
INTRODUCTION

In Women on Probation and Parole, Merry Morash compares two adjacent counties in a northwestern U.S. state with different systems of probation and parole. Gender Responsive County differs from Traditional County by incorporating gender-specific aspects in its supervision system: an emphasis on needs and feelings common to women, supervising officers’ relationships with women, empowering women to leave unhealthy relationships, and fostering improvements in women’s financial self-sufficiency and independence (p. 143). Gender Responsive County also utilizes high level supervision for women, an emphasis on drug treatment, graduated sanctions, and increasingly intense treatment as women violate conditions of supervision (p. 143). By contrast, Traditional County employs a more widespread approach that treats women in the same manner as men and places an emphasis on ensuring that people on probation and parole avoid incarceration (p. 3).

Morash spends the first part of her book explaining her research methods and sample. Data were collected between 1997 and 1999 on all women coming into probation or parole caseloads in the two counties (pp. 8, 17). Eligible women were convicted of at least one felony (p. 17). Qualitative case information was assembled from interviews with the women, as well as chronological case notes and intake forms from the supervising officers (p. 19). Data were also collected from the state correctional department including results of drug tests, prior and new convictions, jail and prison time, and participation in treatment programs (p. 20). In total, 369 cases were gathered and studied (p. 20).

Morash concludes that gender responsive supervision promotes “positive change” in the lives of the women enrolled; meanwhile, traditional supervision “more often leave[s] women with limited oversight, little access to resources, and weak or nonexistent relationships with supervising officers and staff.” (p. 3) Responding to feminist researchers who criticize gender responsive programs for perpetuating two negative consequences—increasing control and punishment of women, in addition to reinforcing narrow gender stereotypes by limiting opportunities such as in employment—Morash addresses three questions in her research: How does community supervision differ in form and outcome in Gender Responsive and Traditional Counties? Does community supervision in either
county reinforce gender stereotypes for women? And, does gender-responsive supervision result in the unintended consequence of increased control and punishment, including incarceration? (pp. 2, 8)

Morash organizes her findings and conclusions according to the women’s dominant illegal activity (p. 22). Comparisons are made within and between the dominant illegal activity subgroups: “Substance-Centered Women,” “Women Involved in Violence,” “Women Influenced by Partners,” “Repeat Economic Offenders,” “One-Time Economic Offenders,” “Marijuana Cultivators,” “Women Who Mistreat Children,” and “Other Women.” (pp. 28-36) Due to the overlap between them, the subgroups can be difficult to distinguish (p. 32). However, Morash’s insightful analysis explores the complexities and intricacies of the women who commit each type of illegal act.

Of the 369 total cases, almost two-thirds of the women had substance-centered dominant crimes (p. 27). Substance centered women were regular users of drugs like methamphetamines, cocaine, heroin, and extreme amounts of alcohol who would commit illegal activities in order to purchase drugs and generate income for basic living expenses (p. 29). They could be classified into three further groups. “Failing” women actively used drugs and had additional “problems” including absconding, committing other crimes, or later becoming incarcerated (p. 30). Women “making it” still used drugs but avoided non-drug related crimes, absconding, and incarceration (p. 30). Women classified as “beyond use” abstained from drugs and did not commit any further crimes (p. 30).

The other one-third of the women in the study was more evenly distributed among subgroups. Women involved in violence were those “whose illegal activity was primarily violent.” (p. 31) Some examples given from the thirteen women in this category were women who engaged in assaultive behavior and used guns (pp. 31-32). At least one of the thirteen women engaged in violent behavior as a result of substance use (p. 32). Economic-only offenders were the second largest subgroup at 17.1 percent of the total population in both counties (p. 28). The fifteen repeat economic offenders frequently committed only economic crimes, such as shoplifting, forgery, or embezzlement (p. 33). The forty-eight one-time economic offenders were those who “[stole] to obtain necessities, help their families during tough times, or acquire unaffordable luxuries.” (p. 34) The six women influenced by partners “broke the law as a result of associations and relationships with men.” (p. 33) Twelve women were classified as marijuana cultivators (p. 28). Nine women were classified as women who mistreat children, or those whose illegal activity was limited to child maltreatment (p. 35). Finally,

1. “[S]upervising officers’ tactics and the women’s actions must be analyzed and understood in relation to dominant illegal activity . . . . The two counties can be meaningfully compared only when separate assessments are developed for the different subgroups.” (p. 27)
2. Data on women who abused alcohol were combined with that of women who used other drugs (p. 27).
3. Women who lose contact with their supervising officers are said to have absconded, which constitutes a violation of supervision requirements. This often results in revocation, with women being placed in jail or prison (p. 10).
those who were classified as “other women” included women who were involved in the drug trade but not users, women about whom there was limited information, substance-centered women who died before the study concluded, felony drivers, and others about whom there was insufficient information to categorize the dominant crimes (pp. 35-37).

OUTCOMES IN THE TWO COUNTIES

In the second portion—the heart of the book—Morash presents her findings organized by dominant illegal activity subgroups. While not all groups exhibited differences in results between the two counties, Morash highlights the instances where women in Gender Responsive County did have more positive results compared to their counterparts in Traditional County. Her observations are thought-provoking and interesting. Nonetheless, the reader is left desiring more discussion of Morash’s supporting reasoning.

Drug Users Who Fail

The statistics revealed little difference between Traditional County and Gender Responsive County in the proportions of substance-centered women who “failed.” (p. 63) In Traditional County, 46.2 percent (61 of 132) failed, while 42.2 percent (46 of 109) failed in Gender Responsive County (p. 63). However, using qualitative data to compare the supervision experiences of the substance-centered women who “failed” by absconding, re-incarceration, or by committing new offenses, Morash asserts a portion of the failures were due to differences in supervision (p. 63). She explains that the other failures resulted from the offenders’ personal choices as well as service and program inadequacies that were also unrelated to the supervision (p. 63). In the end, Morash praises the Gender Responsive County for its broad and intensive supervision program. Yet, she fails to fully explain how the Gender Responsive County is a superior program when the rate of women who “fail” are similar to those in Traditional County (p. 78).

As one reason for the superiority of the Gender Responsive County program, Morash observed that more women were given limited and narrow supervision in Traditional County than in Gender Responsive County (p. 63). Discussing the limited and narrow supervision practices of Traditional County, one woman states:

They deal with the symptoms not the problem. I was treated like I was less than a human. [Supervision could be improved by] addressing individual needs, not with a cookie cutter. Like cattle, they herd you, tag you, just like cattle. . . . Here there is no individual needs assessment (p. 72).

Morash discusses several practices, observed in both counties but more often in Traditional County, that were linked to failure for substance-centered women. These included the practice of chronicling problems but taking no action to ad-
dress them, breaks in provision of services, gaps in substance-abuse intervention, and mismatch of women’s problems with supervising officers’ interventions (p. 64). Supervision at the limited level was not just given to women with limited needs—some women appeared to need more intensive care but were not provided with it (p. 64).

Morash found that supervision in Traditional County did not emphasize a continuum of care and that it failed to provide women with “a personality there to help and support.” (pp. 72-73) On the other hand, Gender Responsive County attempted to provide broader and more intense supervision across the board (p. 74). This included providing help and referral for multiple needs, increased monitoring and contact with the women, and creating a positive relationship between the women and the supervising officers (pp. 74-75). In the few cases in Traditional County where women received high levels of oversight and contact, Morash remarked that the women had similar positive experiences to those in Gender Responsive County (p. 78). Unfortunately, Morash does not include statistics or numbers to support her conclusions, such as how many women were closely supervised in Traditional County and how many of those could be classified as having a “positive” experience despite their failure to remain in the program.

Ultimately, Morash suggests that the similarity in numbers may be due to other factors, such as the women’s personal choice to go back to crime and incarceration despite having broad and intense supervision (p. 79). Some women relocated and absconded, while others avoided contact with their supervising officers and resisted their help (pp. 79-80). Additionally, women in both counties faced difficulties in the form of wait lists and inadequate resources for substance abuse treatment and housing (p. 81). As a result of such systemic difficulties, women would abscond while waiting for treatment programs to open up or fail to show up for their programs when spaces became available (p. 82).

Morash’s discussion of individual women’s experiences in both intensive supervision and limited supervision is fascinating. But, her conclusion that a “[c]loser examination of detailed, qualified data clarified that Traditional County supervision tactics promoted failure,” in the absence of any supporting reasoning, is disappointing (p. 84). Morash’s limited sample, as well as lack of quantitative analysis, prevents her conclusion from having much credibility. The experiences that Morash accumulated and recounted certainly raise the possibility that limited supervision tactics, more common in Traditional County, could have caused higher rates of failure for substance-centered women. However, Morash should have discussed how she reached this conclusion in more depth.

**Women Using Drugs but Not Failing**

The [parole officer] seems to only want to catch women doing something wrong instead of helping them. There is no real communication. - Beth, Traditional County (p. 85).
I couldn’t be happier in learning about myself. I’m learning to live life on life’s terms. I’m complete. - Nora, Gender Responsive County (p. 85).

Substance-centered women in Gender Responsive County were “slightly more likely” to “make it” than counterparts in Traditional County (p. 85). Gender Responsive County included twenty-three more success cases than Traditional County (p. 85). Successful completion of substance abuse programs appeared to lead to other positive changes in women’s lives (p. 93). Once women were clean, they left abusive partners, developed supportive relationships, and obtained education and work skills (p. 94).

Morash found that broad and intensive supervision—again, which was found more often in Gender Responsive County than in Traditional County—was more effective than limited supervision because it addressed a wide range of women’s needs, identified problems early on, provided counseling and support, and promoted positive relationships with supervising officers (p. 96). Supervising officers in Gender Responsive County used tactics that “effectively prompt[ed] treatment,” which resulted in more women receiving treatment for substance use (p. 86). Morash points to individual stories in Gender Responsive County and Traditional County as support. For example, in Gender Responsive County, Nancy was able to continue a year long struggle with entering and completing substance abuse treatment because of the persistence of her supervising officer (p. 91). On the other hand, in Traditional County, Annette relapsed after completion of her drug treatment program when she was given a new supervisor who neglected to address her needs (p. 92).

Women Without Drug Problems

The groups of women who were not found to have substance-centered dominant crimes often belonged to a sample size that was too small to support valid conclusions (p. 133). However, Morash suggests that for each group, Gender Responsive County’s practices may have been more positive than those of Traditional County. For example, two of the nine violence-involved women in Traditional County were arrested during the period of the study, compared to none of the four from Gender Responsive County (p. 133). While Morash concedes that she can only draw “limited conclusions” from this finding, she suggests that Gender Responsive County’s “concrete help” and “wraparound services” may have limited new offenses (p. 133).

Other examples abound. The three women who had partner-influenced dominant crimes in Gender Responsive County left the men who contributed to their crimes, while the three in Traditional County did not (p. 133). Citing the case notes regarding women who left their partners, Morash concludes that supervision tactics account for this difference (p. 133). At least two of the women

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4. In Gender Responsive County, the common practice is for each woman to remain with the same supervising officer (p. 92).
who left their partners in Gender Responsive County did so with the assistance of their supervising officers (pp. 133-34). Morash found that women’s violations of supervision conditions were “often ignored” in Traditional County, whereas Gender Responsive County’s practices “sometimes improve[d] women’s lives through mental health, employment, and other services.” (pp. 139-40) While supervision both in Gender Responsive County and in Traditional County was usually limited for economic offenders—both repeat and one-time offenders—Morash stressed the importance of greater supervision and broader care (pp. 136-37). None of the women in either county’s one-time economic offender group broke the law again during the period of the study (p. 137). Moreover, no differences between counties were observed for women who were convicted of child maltreatment (p. 135). Similarly, gender responsive supervision did not appear to have a better effect on marijuana cultivators when compared to traditional supervision, although all nine of the women classified in this dominant crime category finished the period of the study without further arrest (p. 140).

Although Morash admits that she can only draw limited conclusions from her sample, some of her conclusions appear to be too hasty in light of the small sample size. In both counties, the number of violence-involved women, women who had partner-influenced dominant crimes, and women who were marijuana cultivators were less than ten (p. 28). Just because some women out of that sample exhibited more positive results in Gender Responsive County’s program than in Traditional County does not necessarily mean the program was more effective overall. A larger sample size would lend greater credibility to Morash’s analysis.

CONCLUSION

In her conclusion, Morash advocates the use of gender responsive supervision, which is found to “achieve the gender-responsive ideals of wraparound services and a continuum of care” as well as uniquely promoting an effective chain of intervention (pp. 143, 145). Gender-responsive supervision tactics promote positive results, while traditional supervision may create “misleadingly positive” official results (p. 143).

While I agree with Morash’s conclusion that “[p]rograms like Gender Responsive County’s community corrections enable women to improve their lives and escape forces that promote drug use and crime,” I am uncomfortable with the generalizations that Morash asserts based on the small sample (p. 159). Morash attempts to draw relational conclusions from her research but often makes generalizations out of her sample without providing numbers to strengthen her conclusions. Additionally, Morash struggles to draw conclusions about women in minorities from the study by virtue of the small sample size. The sample studied included only three Asian women, all of whom committed “only economic offenses.” (p. 53) Morash comments on this fact as if it is significant, but fails to discuss the crimes of these women in detail (p. 53). Morash also remarks that, “[c]ompared to other women, Hispanics were less often substance-centered and
However, there were only thirty-seven total Hispanic women in the study, making it difficult to draw any generalizations from Morash’s observations (p. 20).

While these factors are not the main focus of her research, Morash comments, “[t]he literature establishes the importance of the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and other markers of social location to explain a person’s life course, resources, and opportunities.” (p. 22) Morash’s attempt to discuss trends in her sample by race is one way in which she tries to recognize the importance of intersectionality. Where possible, she discusses how social class may affect women’s crimes and recidivism (pp. 51, 137). However, analysis is limited by the lack of background information available on her sample—for instance, only a few women identified themselves as lesbian (p. 22). As a result, Morash does not address these factors in great detail.

Morash found that the data did not support arguments made by feminist researchers that gender-responsive corrections lead to increased “stereotyping, excessive control, and punishment.” (p. 107) To the contrary, she found that women in Gender Responsive County who experienced programs with more control seemed both to benefit from, as well as appreciate, that level of care (p. 108). Morash found “no evidence” that supervising officers in Gender Responsive County stereotyped women according to narrow ideas about appropriate gender roles (p. 108). She suggests instead that Traditional County’s practices may be limiting and stereotyping in that they “maintain women in the homemaker role, or in low-paying women’s work.” (p. 113) In Traditional County, officers did not encourage women to gain employment-related skills as much as in Gender Responsive County (p. 113).

Although Morash’s study suffers from a small sample size, overgeneralizations, and a lack of analysis of intersectionality, her research does shed light on the benefits of intensive, gender-adaptive supervision in probation and parole. It is unclear to what extent gender responsive supervision is effective in non-substance-centered women, but Morash’s study reveals that there are women who benefit greatly from gender responsive services. In fact, it appears from her study that all people on probation and parole—whether female or male—could benefit from increased supervision and attentive supervising officers. Morash found that feminist fears of gender stereotyping and excessive control were not supported by the stories of the individual women in the study. Rather, the supervision practices of Traditional County were found to be possibly more stereotyping and limiting (p. 113). Consequently, broader, more intensive care by female supervising officers who are consistently involved and attempt to develop positive relationships with the women offenders merits further study. Future research should focus on intersectionality and analyze factors neglected by Morash such as race, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation.

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