

Transportation Strategies of Female Offenders

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DEPENDABLE TRANSPORTATION CAN include automobile ownership, proximity to affordable and reliable public transit, or physical ability to walk or bike from place to place. The challenge of dependable transportation has been well studied in low-income and elderly populations—populations similar to female offenders. Female offenders commonly experience financial hardship (Holtfreter, Reising, & Morash, 2004) as well as unemployment, unsafe housing (Schram, Koons-Witt, Williams, & McShane, 2006), and significant health concerns (Maruschak & Berzofsky, 2015). However, unlike these populations, female offenders have disadvantages unique to their criminal-justice system involvement (Daly, 1992; Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988). Due to pasts demarcated by trauma, many face depression and anxiety symptoms, anger/hostility, adult victimization, parental stress, and relationship dysfunction (Belknap, 1996; Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003; Covington & Bloom, 2003; O'Brien, 2006; Owen & Bloom, 1995; Richie, 2001). Some also face psychosis symptoms. These conditions likely translate into greater need for transportation to meet day-to-day needs and complete supervision successfully.

Yet, because of these problems, female offenders are often categorized on risk and needs assessments as higher risk to recidivate (Hannah-Moffat, 1999). As a result, women are then required to attend a greater number of supervision programs. Complicating the situation, programs appropriate for women tend to be farther away geographically because fewer women are in the criminal justice system. Further still, because 56 percent of females in

federal prisons and 62 percent in state prisons have at least one child (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), female offenders are likely to have primary caretaking responsibilities for minor children who complicate travel (Covington, 2002). Consequently, women involved in the criminal justice system experience a greater and usually unrecognized need for dependable and affordable transportation than men, low-income women, and the elderly.

Previous research has found that access to dependable transportation, in low-income populations, has been linked to several favorable outcomes. When women do own cars, they live in better neighborhoods—ones with lower poverty rates and fewer health risks (Pendall et al., 2014). In fact, owning a car is more important to getting, and maintaining, employment than one's education or work experience (Lichtenwalter, Koeske, & Sales, 2006). Therefore, it's not surprisingly that a 2014 Urban Institute Study (Pendall et al., 2014) recommends that low-income women need greater access to cars.

Access to public transit is also important for labor participation. In two large U.S. cities, Sanchez (1999) found that people who lived closer to a bus or subway stop had significantly higher rates of labor participation. Living closer to better transportation is important because it improves access to medical services and social programs (Cvitkovich & Wister, 2001). Individuals with worse transportation access report increased levels of stress, reduced labor productivity, lower employee performance, and absenteeism (Cox, Griffiths, & Rial-Gonzalez, 2000; Gottholmseder, Nowotny, Pruckner, & Theurl,

2009; Jacobson et al., 1996). In short, employment and health outcomes are better for those with better access to transportation.

Looking specifically at offender populations, previous research has highlighted the prevalence of transportation disadvantage as well as its problematic outcomes (Northcutt Bohmert, 2016, 2014; Northcutt Bohmert & DeMaris, forthcoming). In one Midwestern state sample, 57.4 percent of women offenders (210 of 366) were transportation-disadvantaged (Northcutt Bohmert, 2014). In follow-up interviews (n=75), women identified the common problems with transportation: cost, access, reliability, and safety (Northcutt Bohmert, 2016). The majority of the women in the sample (80.9 percent) earned less than \$10,000 per year, or just \$192 per week. In fact, 20 percent of women reported that the cost of transportation was a problem for them. Sixty-eight percent of women did not own or lease their own vehicles. Among those who did have cars, 32 percent reported car problems such as their car breaking down frequently. Buses providing limited or inadequate service were a problem reported by 22.7 percent of women. And 12 percent of women in the sample reported in the in-depth interviews that safety concerns were a problem. In turn, transportation problems turned into missed supervision appointments, work, a medical appointment, mental health appointment, or a supervision-related appointment (e.g., a court date). Women with less access to transportation had a higher incidence of supervision violations, arrest, and convictions, and experienced these events more rapidly than women with higher levels of transportation access,

although the results were not statistically significant (Northcutt Bohmert, 2014).

Thus, there is a demonstrated need to examine ways to increase female offenders' access to dependable transportation. This article describes the agentic strategies women use to increase their access to transportation and proposes changes to existing supervision practices and criminal justice policies that may increase individuals' access to dependable transportation.

Methods

Sample

The study uses data from female offenders ($n=366$) who were surveyed across one Midwestern state, four times over three years (Morash, Kashy, Northcutt Bohmert, Cobbina, & Smith, 2015; Northcutt Bohmert, 2016), from 2011 to 2014. The 16 counties from which offenders were sampled encompassed 68.5 percent of the 2011 state population, all major population centers (e.g., Detroit, Grand Rapids), and a mix of rural and suburban areas.

Women were recruited from 73 parole and probation agents' caseloads. Interviews occurred after two, five, and eight months of supervision had passed. An impressive 94.3 percent of women ($n=379$) participated in the third wave of interviews. Because 12 of them were institutionalized (i.e., in jail, prison, or inpatient substance abuse treatment) and one woman was too physically ill to leave her home, the sample for this study is restricted to the 366 women who could appropriately answer questions about transportation access. Follow-up interviews were conducted with a subgroup of 75 women to capture female offenders' additional needs. Thematic analysis was applied to these interviews.

Measures

In-depth interviews were used to capture women's insights and experiences regarding adaptive strategies they use to increase transportation access. Women were asked, "Thinking about the ways you arrange transportation, now or in the past, what is hard or easy about it?" Women were also asked (1) what strategies they used to avoid missing important appointments, as well as (2) whether their strategies for arranging transportation were stressful or easy to use, and (3) whether these actions placed them in danger or a difficult situation. This line of inquiry was helpful in highlighting both strategies that work for women and those that do not.

Results

Sixty-eight of the seventy-five women interviewed each reported using up to six adaptive strategies to increase their access to dependable transportation. Grouping the types of strategies women use, there were nine main strategies women used to increase access to transportation:

- Planning in advance was the most common strategy women utilized (52 percent). Women reported leaving early for appointments, arranging rides ahead of time with people or agencies, and/or using a planner to stay organized.
- Building extensive support networks (28 percent), such as having several people ready as backups, was the next most common route. Research shows social support is key for women but also less expected than for men.
- Women relied on several modes of transportation (28 percent), for example, planning for a ride but also having a bus pass available for appointments.
- Women chose to live close to where they needed to travel (26.7 percent).
- One in five women relied exclusively on romantic partners (18.7 percent) and avoided asking others for help.
- One in five women drove illegally (18.7 percent).
- Some women traded goods and services (13.3 percent) such as childcare, food stamps, hairstyling, companionship or other non-taxable employment for rides.
- Another strategy was limiting travel (8 percent) or limiting range of travel.
- Finally, some turned to panhandling or working other odd jobs to pay for transportation (6.7 percent), including plasma donation, posting advertisements on Craigslist, or other activities that can be counted as taxable employment.

Most women interviewed were determined to "get where they needed to go" to avoid technical violations. To do so, many women would employ more than one of the above strategies at a time, in case one failed, as was too often the case. For example, a common combination of strategies was for women who arranged for several people to be available to take them places (32 narratives) to also use multiple modes of transportation (14 of those 32 narratives). One woman explained that she, "Just called ahead of time and let, you know, whoever was going to know what time I had to be there. And if not, if that failed, ride the bus." Despite using several strategies,

women still encountered transportation problems. Sometimes a ride would not show up. Sometimes a bus would run late. Despite women's best efforts, they would still have negative outcomes.

Policies and Practices that Improve Dependable Transportation

Access to dependable transportation, a cornerstone piece of successful reentry, can be increased through changes to current policy and practice. For some women the use of these strategies was not enough to overcome social structural deficits. For example, the scheduling of random drug screens, exactly because they are random, makes it difficult to plan ahead to arrange a ride, borrow a vehicle, or use the bus (due to the location of the screening center). For women in these situations, the requirements of supervision voided many of the common transportation strategies. This information is important for agents and agencies to understand to better assist their clients, or at least make them aware of the transportation problems facing their clients.

Changes in the system are needed. The first target for intervention can be the women themselves. The findings of this study regarding which strategies work best for women to increase their access can be shared with women offenders new to supervision or who struggle with transportation problems. The results of previous studies (Cornacchione et al., 2016) show that supervision agents provide a lot of advice to female offenders and that, in turn, female offenders remember this advice and employ it. Advice regarding how to increase transportation access is a promising intervention.

The next target for intervention is community supervision officers and their policies. Most of the women in this study seemed to have understanding agents who did not penalize them for their transportation problems. However, there were women who went to jail when a ride fell through. The information provided here, especially on strategies women use to overcome transportation deprivation, could be incorporated into professional training and shared with women offenders to help them surmount their transportation obstacles. Cognizant of the limitations placed on community supervision officers with high caseloads and few resources at their disposal, there are several promising recommendations:

- When possible, implement practices that minimize travel for women such as using

phone reporting for low-risk supervision clients.

- Share prosocial strategies with women who struggle with transportation to help them increase their access to dependable transportation.
- Be lenient with clients who have transportation deficits but are otherwise excelling.
- Consider scheduling clients with transportation problems for easier travel times such as when buses run more frequently or when children are in school. Alternatively, where possible, have agents travel to clients.
- Be judicious about the amount of, and distance to, locations women must travel for appointments.
- Consider funding clients with Uber accounts, providing bicycles, or prioritizing housing in areas with better transportation access or safer walking routes.

Communities are also a fruitful place for intervention. Public transit authorities should study how their current services, and especially reductions in their services, impact female offenders and other low-income populations; they should also consider the safety concerns raised in this study as well. Community members can advocate for better bus routes and schedules, vote for elected officials who support reductions in harsh sentencing, and encourage the use of gender-specific approaches to correctional programming.

Finally, the front end of the system is also an important area to target for changes in policy and practice. Judges could recommend shorter, less intensive forms of probation and parole, recognizing that risk assessment tools typically overclassify women into higher risk levels (Hannah-Moffat, 1999)—this exacerbates transportation problems by requiring more programming.

Criminal justice administrators could develop and use risk and needs instruments that assess items related to transportation. Ideally, these instruments would be developed on female populations as well. Transportation is a stable enough construct that an instrument administered semi-annually should provide valuable information to supervision agents and other professionals (e.g., healthcare providers) relative to women's needs and ability to attend required appointments.

Conclusion

The role of dependable transportation for female offenders is probably the least explored facet of reentry needs (housing, employment, health care). This article is the first to both

present strategies women can use to address transportation problems as well as offer suggestions for policy and practice. The study's results suggest that women use many successful strategies such as planning in advance or utilizing several modes of transportation, yet their situation remains tenuous.

The present study improves on existing research in several important ways. It uses a longitudinal design and a large sample of women from both rural and urban populations. It lays the initial groundwork for establishing transportation access as a problem for female offenders. The use of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies strengthened the study by making it possible to flesh out complex topics, such as agency, with in-depth interviews (n=75). Future research should utilize experimental designs that provide enhanced transportation services to offenders to isolate the effect of transportation.

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