

2010

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## Recommended Citation

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# Empowering female offenders to reach success in probation and parole

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**Abstract:** Responding to the need for gender specific programs within the criminal justice system, this study evaluates a women's life skills group that is geared towards education and empowerment for female offenders at the Board of Probation and Parole (BOPP) in a small southeastern city. The researcher evaluated the effectiveness of this group using a single system model. The desired outcome of the group was to enhance the women's knowledge in areas such as self-esteem, parenting, domestic violence, job readiness, and health. Findings reveal overall satisfaction of the participants with the life skills group as well as improvement in individual life satisfaction. This study offers promising avenues to empower women to successfully complete their probation or parole time and become better functioning members of society.

## **Statement of the Problem**

The rate at which women commit crimes is on the rise (Gowdy, Cain, & Sutton, 2003). In fact, it is increasing at a faster rate than that of male offenders. Between 1985 and 1995, the amount of men incarcerated doubled, rising from 691,800 to 1,437,600. However, during those same years, the amount of women incarcerated tripled, increasing from 40,500 to 113,100. These statistics do not even reflect the total number of women supervised by the criminal justice system as the numbers of those in probation and parole are not accounted for. According to the U.S. Department of Justice's annual report, women account for 23 percent of the nation's probationers and 12 percent of the nation's parolees. In 2007, there were 699,230 women on probation and 96,944 women on parole (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008).

The increased amount of women being convicted of crimes creates a social problem as the creation of specialized gender specific programs has not been increased to match the influx of female offenders. The needs of female offenders differ from those of men largely due to their past experiences of sexual or physical abuse. Also, as many female offenders are mothers, the responsibility of their children is also a primary concern. Moreover, female offenders are more likely to be addicted to illegal substances and to have mental health issues. Many states and jurisdictions do not have special provisions or programs to meet the needs of these women (Gowdy et al., 2003). This problem not only affects the women themselves and their families, but also the greater society that women will reenter into.

This literature review will explore the various aspects affecting America's female offenders. It will show the need for gender specific programs by looking at ways in which female offenders are different from male offenders. It will also explore the various probable causes of offense and the specific needs of female offenders, giving special attention to mothers.

Furthermore, the aspects of successful completion of previous offenders and what has been found to be most useful in helping them complete their supervision will be discussed.

### **Problem Exploration**

Historically, women have been considered the property of men, whether it be their husband, father or other family member (Women's Issues, 1997). In fact, the U.S Supreme Court ruled that women were not 'persons' under the law in 1894. Since women were not considered people, it was inconceivable for them to be capable of willfully committing a crime. If a married woman committed a crime, it was done only under the coercion of her husband.

Throughout the nineteenth century, women committed very few crimes compared to men (Women's Issues, 1997). The only exception was prostitution in which women dominated the number of offenses. It was a common occurrence at this time for women to receive longer sentences than men for petty offenses which was supposedly meant as a method of reforming the women, not punishing them.

Currently, the rate of female crime is on the rise (Gowdy et al., 2003). The rate increase has actually been greater than that of men although men still commit more crimes annually than women in every category, except shoplifting and prostitution (Women's Issues, 1997).

Some of the main aspects of the problem of female offenders are the need for gender-specific programs, the reasons why women commit crimes, the specific needs of women (mothers), and the successful completion of probation or parole.

### ***The need for gender specific programs***

There is a great need for programs designed specifically for female offenders as female offender rates increase (Gowdy et al., 2003). In order to better understand the population of female offenders it is important to note the differences between female offenders and male

offenders. First, women are more likely to be convicted of crimes involving drugs or property offense while men are more likely to commit violent crimes or driving under the influence. Also, female offenders have lower annual incomes and higher rates of unemployment when compared with male offenders (Olson, Lurigio, & Seng, 2000). Moreover, female offenders are 12 percent more likely than male offenders to have a history of drug abuse in their family and almost twice as likely to have a history of alcohol abuse. Women are also more likely to suffer physical, sexual, and emotional abuse than men and are 40 percent more likely to have had family members with convicted felonies (Payne, Gainey, & Carey, 2005).

There are also differences between the genders when comparing prison populations. For example, when in prison, women tend to be more social with each other, cohabitating with more ease and less racial tension than men (Carbone-Lopez, and Kruttschnitt, 2003). They also tend to be more talkative and verbal with the correctional staff (Schram, Koons-Witt, & Morash, 2004). Women are more likely to negotiate with the staff more often and be more open about their emotions and feelings with the other women as well as the correctional staff. In women's prisons, there should be less emphasis on security and more placed on rehabilitation as female inmates are less violent than their male counterparts. Overall, it was found that women tend to respond better in an environment in which they are allowed to communicate openly about their emotions and histories with correctional staff and other inmates.

These findings suggest the need for gender specific programs especially encompassing education/job training, the treatment of substance abuse, and help for the victims of physical, sexual and emotional abuse (Olson et al, 2000; Payne et al, 2005). Also, while women are in prison and after they are released into the community, it is important to empower them by allowing them to participate in decisions that affect their lives (Schram et al, 2004).

Some of the limitations of the study done by Payne et al (2005) include sample selection bias and self reporting of the participants to the probation officers, not the researchers themselves.

### ***Why some women commit crimes***

Men and women also have different causes or reasons for offense. Where men are more likely to commit a crime due to low self-control, women are more likely to commit crimes due to their socialization (Gunnison, & McCartan, 2005). For example, women are more likely to offend if they have been previously abused (sexually or physically), received a head injury before the age of twelve, were a part of a gang as an adolescent, had friends who had been arrested, used alcohol or drugs as an adolescent, or were raised in a household without love. The risk factor that was found to be more predictive of male criminal offense was neglect.

Another risk factor of female criminality is domestic violence (Whaley, Moe, Eddy, & Daugherty, 2007). In fact, some women report committing crimes due to threats by a spouse or partner. Women also commit crimes to please their significant other or they might take the blame for a crime that their spouse or partner actually committed in order to protect him or in fear of him. Other researchers have found women who are involved with the criminal justice system are more likely to have had suffered multiple traumatic events (Cook, Smith, Tusher, & Raiford, 2005; O'Brien, 2006). Some of these events include: the sudden unexpected death of a loved one, child molestation, multiple suicide attempts, threats of being killed, family violence as a child, having been stalked, being in a motor vehicle accident, a life threatening illness and having a miscarriage or an abortion. Women who have been homeless tend to suffer more traumatic events in their lives and are therefore more likely to be at risk for committing a crime (Cook et al, 2005).

Since so much research reported problems with substance abuse in female felons (Bloom, Owen, Rosenbaum, & Deschenes, 2003; Golder, 2005; Gunnison, & McCartan, 2005; O'Brien, 2006; Olson et al, 2000; Tindall, Oser, Duvall, Leukefeld, & Webster, 2005), it is important to note it as a significant risk factor for female criminality. Substance abuse not only can get these women in trouble with the law, but it can also lead to social and emotional problems. For example, O'Brien (2006) found that women thought no one would hire them because of their drug use and criminal record. Employment for them would not only be a source of income but something to do to battle loneliness and boredom.

Specifically concerning girls and young women, researchers have found family issues such as conflicts with parents, parental absence, the drug problems of parents, and poor communication with parents to be contributions for delinquency (Bloom et al, 2003). As with adult women, physical, sexual and emotional abuse are significant risk factors to delinquency as well as substance abuse and gang involvement. Running away from home or not having a safe home to live in can also be a precursor to criminal actions. School difficulties which lead to dropping out is another factor in female adolescent delinquency as schools are a good opportunity for early intervention for young women. Lastly, the early onset of sexual activity in girls is another risk factor for becoming an offender (Bloom et al, 2003).

These findings suggest the need to create programs of intervention such as programs of public awareness about the effects of substance abuse and prevention programs for victims of abuse. Also, adolescents are more at risk of committing crimes if their siblings have had past convictions. Instead of targeting just the individual offender with prevention, entire families should be considered at risk and be given prevention treatment (Payne et al, 2005). Particularly in the juvenile justice system, it is important to address the separate issues of girls (Bloom et al,

2003). Therapeutic interventions and programs to educate women on how to develop safety in their own environments are also recommended (Cook et al, 2005).

Some limitations of the study done by Gunnison, & McCartan, (2005) include a small sample size, a retrospective sample design and the fact that all the participants were incarcerated at the time. It might have been more helpful to also get participants from women who had been released from the system. A few of the limitations of the study done by Whaley et al (2007) include the eligibility requirements and self-selection done by the researchers. The study done by Cook et al (2005) also had limitations in that they had a low participation rate and the data were collected by self-report.

### *Specific needs of women*

Women in the criminal justice system have multiple areas of need that surpass not only women in the general population, but also women in treatment facilities with no records of criminal history (Kubbiak & Arfken, 2006). For example, women involved with the criminal justice system reported higher depressive symptoms, more traumatic exposure and more frequent illegal drug use than the other women in the treatment facility. Also, the criminal justice women were found to be in significantly greater need than the other women in four domains: education/employment, alcohol/drugs, accommodations and finance. They also reported needing more services in the family and marriage domain.

Probation officer's views have also been polled to get an idea on the needs of their female clients (Seng & Lurigio, 2005). About three-fourths of probation officers were in agreement that women probationer's needs were different than those of the men on their case load. The most frequently reported client needs were related to childcare followed by needs for employment, housing and financial services. Medical needs related to overall health, hygiene, prenatal care



and pregnancy were also frequently mentioned. The need for shelters to house victims of domestic abuse and the need for substance abuse programs or facilities also received high ratings. Other researchers (Holtfreter & Morash, 2003) found similar result in substance abuse, mental health and childcare needs as well as educational or employment needs. They also found that female offenders are disproportionately from minority groups such as African Americans and Hispanics.

Mothers who are convicted felons have specific needs that may be different than those female felons who are not mothers. Some researchers have found mothers who become felons suffer from more maternal distress and role strain because of their conviction (Ardittie, & Few, 2008; Berry & Eigenberg, 2003). The longer a mother is separated from her child, the more intense her role strain is (Berry & Eigenberg, 2003). Also, the longer a woman is incarcerated, the more difficult it could be to maintain a relationship with her child. Many incarcerated women indicated that they missed the joys of being a parent and they did not think their children were getting adequate attention from them. They also frequently worried that their role of a parent was affected by their incarceration. Ardittie et al (2008) found maternal distress to be characterized by health problems, guilt and worry about children, loss-related trauma, dysfunctional intimate relationships and economic inadequacy.

One of the limitations of the study done by Kubbiak & Arfken (2006) is that the researchers did not take into account depressive or trauma related symptoms in the different groups of women.

### ***Successful completion***

After reviewing the various differences in gender, the probable causes of female criminality and the specific needs of women, it is important to look at what has helped women

successfully complete probation or parole in the past. One study found some demographic factors that play a role in successful completion (Carmichael, Gover, Koons-Witt, & Inabnit, 2005). For example, white women and older women were found to be significantly more likely to successfully complete their supervision. Employment, education, marital status and children also had a positive effect on the outcome of community supervision. On the other hand, alcohol and drug use during supervision were found to be negative effects on their successful completion. When asked what would have helped them complete their supervision more successfully, the top five responses women gave were: adequate financial resources, transportation, employment, improved self-esteem and education.

More qualitative research has been done on the female offenders' opinions of what helped them to successfully reenter their community after being incarcerated (Parsons, & Warner-Robbins, 2002). The women in this study noted their belief in God or a higher power as being the most helpful in their reentry process. Their belief was a source of peace and strength in their lives. The next most dominant theme was freedom from drug addiction and the importance of rehabilitation. Other things that they found helpful were female support groups, supportive friends and family that were not drug users, personal determination, children as a driving force for change, the importance of having a role model who has been through the same thing and being employed.

Some limitations of the study done by Carmichael et al (2005) were that there was no distinction made between the paroles and probationers in the sample taken even though they might have gone through totally different supervision experiences. Also, this study did not take into account the seriousness of the offense committed by these women. Thirdly, the agency from which this data was collected did not have a gender specific program in place. The study done by

Parsons, & Warner-Robbins (2002) was limited in the fact that the participants were all selected from the same facility in California. Also, one of the qualifications for participating in the study was that the participant had to have been released from jail at least six months prior.

The social problem of the increase in female criminality deserves special attention. These women have specific needs that are seemingly not being met by the criminal justice system. The purpose of this literature review was to explore how to best meet those needs and to understand what actions could produce successful results for females on probation or parole. While research supports the need for female-specific interventions, little research exists about such programs. This current research fills a gap in the literature by presenting data of an evaluation of a female-specific program for offenders.

## **Methods**

The purpose of this study was to develop a women's life skills group that is geared towards education and empowerment for the female offenders at the Board of Probation and Parole (BOPP) in a small, southeastern city and then evaluate key elements of this group. The desired outcome of the group was to enhance the life satisfaction of the participants using key elements discovered in previous research.

The group was designed according to the information discovered in the above literature review as well as from personal conversations with probation and parole officers and female clients concerning the needs of female offenders. Six group sessions were scheduled to meet every other week for twelve weeks. For each session, a different professional from the community was invited to speak with the participants on varying topics according to their field of expertise. The general outline for each session began with a presentation from the professional, followed by an activity for the participants, and then finished with a group

discussion.

The initial group meeting addressed the emotional health of the participants. A counselor from a local agency was invited to speak with the women about self-esteem issues and provided counsel on how to live an emotionally health life. The following meeting touched on parenting issues. A speaker who teaches parenting classes within the community was invited to speak to the women on communication skills, parenting styles, and discipline. The third group was a collaboration with the BOPP Employment Specialist with the intent to give the participants job readiness skills. The participants from the women's group joined other clients from the BOPP as a speaker from a local Career Center talked about interviewing skills, résumé writing, and career opportunities.

The fourth meeting covered the topic of domestic violence. A case manager from a local domestic violence shelter came to talk about indicators of domestic violence, the cycle of abuse, and the help that is available in the area. This same topic was continued in the fifth meeting for the first hour of the meeting. A professor of nursing from a local university came to speak about health during the last hour of the meeting, discussing facts about nutrition, exercise, sleeping habits, and simple tips on how to live a healthy life. The final group included a celebration of completion of the program. The two participants who completed the program received certificates of completion and were given the chance to assess the program's effectiveness.

Procedures for protecting participants as specified by the Institutional Review Board of Southern Adventist University were adhered to throughout the research process. The evaluation method used in this study is the Single System Design. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the life skills group, various interviews with the participants were necessary to measure their progress throughout the group process. Prior to gathering any information, written consent was

obtained from each participant. Thereafter, a baseline interview was conducted using a psychosocial assessment and the Client Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) (Greenley, Greenberg, & Brown, 1997). Once the initial information was gathered, the participant and the interviewer discussed the various goals the woman wished to obtain during the process of the group. At the final group meeting, the CEQ was repeated and the participants were asked to discuss how effective the group was.

The two instruments used in this study include the aforementioned psychosocial assessment and the CEQ. The psychosocial assessment used is one that is standard to this BOPP office. The CEQ is a 42-item measure consists of two instruments designed to assess a client's satisfaction with services (SS) and quality of life (QL) (Greenley et al., 1997). The QL portion of the CEQ was the main means of evaluating the intervention. It measures the client's life satisfaction in seven areas of life: living situation, finances, leisure, family relations, social relations, health, and access to health care. These factors were discussed throughout the group session making this instrument an appropriate measurement tool for this specific group.

Quantitative data from the Single System Design were analyzed using the data from the pretest scores and the post test scores of the CEQ. A definition for the Single System Design is as follows:

Single system designs collect quantitative data...during the baseline and intervention phases. Single system designs allow workers to develop, along with the client, individualized plans and interventions for addressing the targeted behavior and to monitor and evaluate client progress continuously at different points during the intervention phase and at termination of services. (Salahu-Din, 2003, p. 262)

A chart was created for the single systems data using the AB design for each participant who completed the program. Additional qualitative data that were collected solely at the final group meeting were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The women were selected to be part of the group through a referral by their Probation or Parole Officer for emotional, social, or financial difficulties. The participants ranged in age from 23 to 57 years of age and of these, six were African American, one was biracial and one was Caucasian. There were eight women referred from the officers, of which six participated in the group. The information of the clients who were referred but did not participate in any of the group sessions will not be included in this study.

### **Findings**

Of the six women who participated in the program, three attended only one meeting and three attended more than one. Of the three that showed to only one meeting, one was referred to the group after the fourth meeting and therefore was unable to attend all of the meetings, one lacked interest and left halfway through the second meeting, and the third showed interest but was unable to come to most of the meetings. Of the three participants who were present for more than one meeting, one attended two meetings but was unable to continue due to pregnancy complications, another attended four of the six sessions, and the third attended all six sessions. The last two participants mentioned were the only ones to complete the program.

As previously mentioned, the participants in this study were assessed using two instruments: a psychosocial assessment and the Client Experience Questionnaire (CEQ). The psychosocial assessment was used to establish a baseline and the other instrument was used to track the progress of the clients after the intervention of the life skills group was implemented. The quality of life (QL) portion of the CEQ was conducted with each participant in the initial interview and again after the termination of the group. The satisfaction with services (SS) portion of the CEQ was conducted with the participants at the end of the group. The results of these two instruments will be discussed here with a specific focus on the two of the six participants who

completed the program in its entirety.

The QL measures the participant's satisfaction with her life and is set on a scale from one to seven; seven being the highest level of satisfaction, one being the lowest. The norm score of the QL section of the CEQ is 4.8 (Greenley, et al., 1997). Four of the six participants completed the CEQ at their initial interview. The mean among the four participants in the initial intake was 4.70. This mean is slightly lower than the norm. Some reasons for this difference may be found in the hardships and difficult life events that the participants have experienced and discussed with the interviewer in their psychosocial evaluation. Only the two participants who completed the program repeated the QL portion of the survey at the final meeting and conducted the SS as well. The average of these two participant's scores at the initial intake was 3.52. They actually had the two lowest scores on the QL section of the four participants. At the termination of the group, their mean score was 4.3, a difference of 0.78 from the initial group or a 22 percent increase. The results of the two participants who completed the program in its entirety will now be explored at an individual level.

At the initial intake, Bethany\* scored a 3.65 on the QL scale. She mentioned in her psychosocial assessment that she was unhappy with her current living conditions and her social functioning lacked any sufficient support outside of her teenage children and alcoholic roommate. The psychosocial assessment also showed a history of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse as child. Some of the participant's recent stressors include the death of a young family member, loss of her home and financial difficulties. These factors also showed themselves in the CEQ as she answered "Terrible" and "Unhappy" (the two lowest possible options on the QL) for some of the questions regarding her living arrangements. Bethany also chose these lowest options to describe her financial situation, physical health, and the amount of friendship in her

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\* Pseudonym

life

By the termination of the group, Bethany's QL was closer to that of the group norm with a 4.48. This was a 23 percent increase from her initial score. The changes in this final assessment include higher responses to the questions under the living arrangements and finances categories of the CEQ. The participant attributed these changes to her change of location from living with an alcoholic roommate to living with her child's father and from the attainment of financial security through Disability benefits. Also, her response to specific questions about her physical health and the amount of friendship in her life increased by two points each. (See Fig. 1 for Bethany's individual results of improvement in each problem category and overall achievement). The participant mentioned that she enjoyed the ability to talk to other women in the group and that it was an overall good experience for her. Her SS score at the end was a one; the highest level of satisfaction on the SS scale.

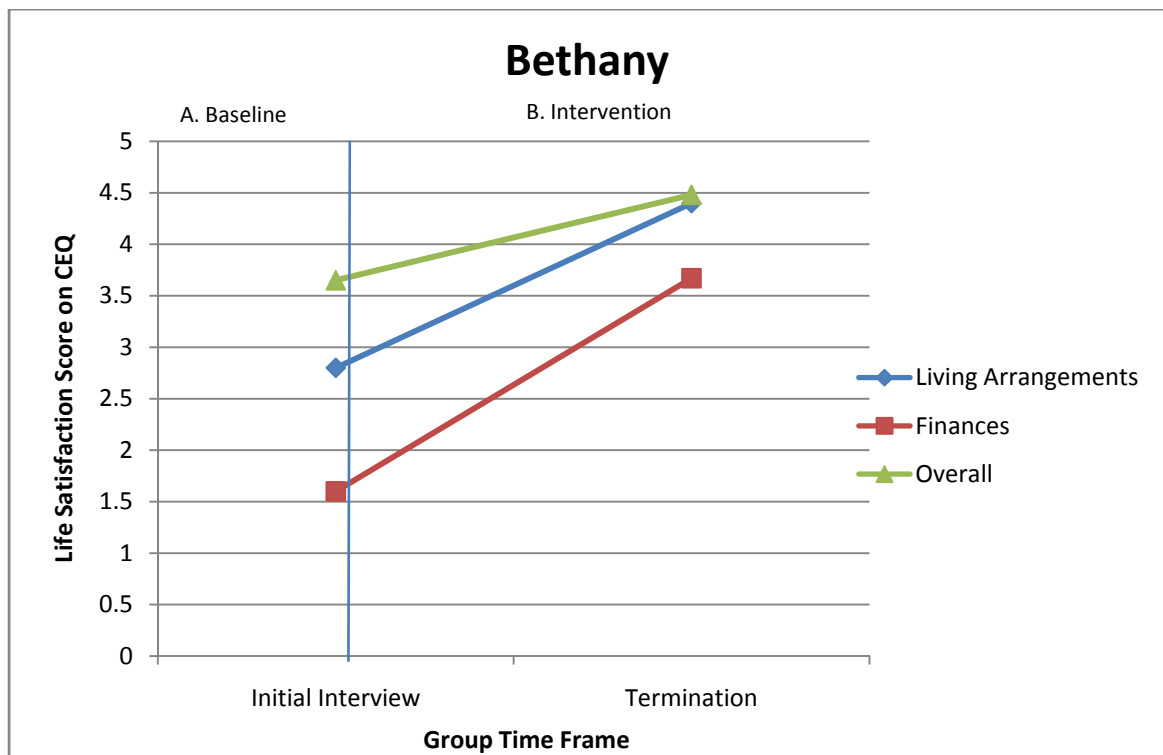


Figure 1 – Individual Client Experience Questionnaire results (Bethany)

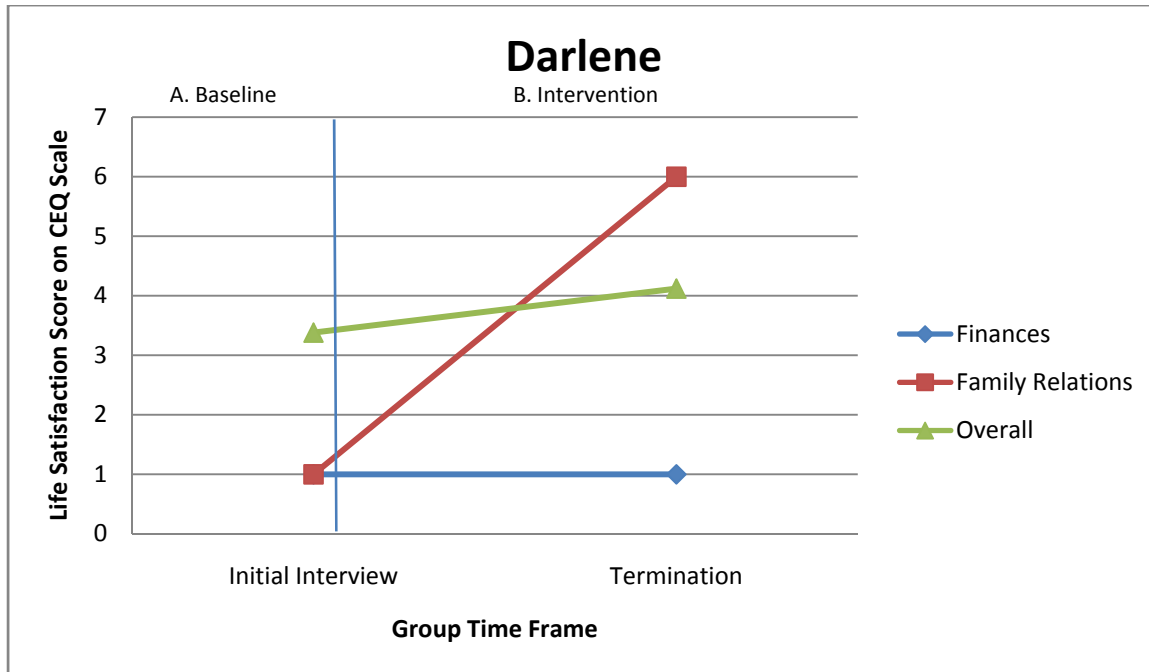


Darlene<sup>†</sup> also completed the program, although she did not attend all the meetings as Bethany did. Her QL score at initial intake was 3.38. Some of the highest scoring categories or positive aspects of her life were her living arrangements and social relations. The lowest scores or problems were displayed in the finances and family relations categories. All the questions in these categories were answered with a one, the lowest level of satisfaction on the QL scale. As indicated in the participant's psychosocial assessment, the low scores in the finances categories of the QL may be attributed to her lack of employment and recent loss of her main financial and social support. Also, the estranged relationship with her children may explain the low scores in family relations.

At the final group, Darlene's QL score had improved to a 4.12. This is an increase of 0.74 or 22 percent. Her answers in the finances category remained the same, however, her response to the family relations section improved greatly by five points in each question. (See Fig. 2 for Darlene's individual results of improvement in each problem category and overall achievement). The increase in score can also be attributed to higher scores on the questions related to physical health. Darlene wrote on the SS survey of her success in the program. "At first I was down, now I feel like I can go on." The total score of her SS survey was 1.12. She mentioned in the final group meeting that the program as a whole was a good experience for her and she appreciated the fact that it was an all-female group.

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<sup>†</sup> Pseudonym



**Figure 2 – Individual Client Experience Questionnaire results (Darlene)**

### Discussion

The literature review discussed the varying issues of female felons in the United States. It showed the need for gender specific programs by discussing the differences between male and female offenders. It then reviewed some of the causes of female criminality. Also, the specific needs of female offenders were brought out. The aspects linked to successful completion were also discussed. This research was done in order to obtain an idea of what types of programs and policies female offenders would most likely benefit from. From this research, a life skills group was developed for female offenders.

This single system evaluation was conducted in order to note the progress of participants in a women's life skills group at the Board of Probation and Parole in a southeastern city. This evaluation was made possible by using various instruments including a psychosocial assessment and the Client Experience Questionnaire (CEQ). These instruments were used with each individual and then the results of these instruments were combined to obtain data for the entire

group.

The findings show progress for the two participants who completed the program. On the QL section of the CEQ, the life satisfaction of the participants increased by 22 percent over the duration of the group. These results suggest that the life skills group may have been one factor that contributed to the improvements in the life satisfaction of the participants.

The fact that there was not a large amount of client participation and only two actually completed the program suggests that changes could and should be made to the practice and be implemented in the next female life skills group that the agency creates. To better assess the needs of future clients, during the final meeting of the group the current participants were asked how well they were pleased with the outcomes of the group. Each participant verbally affirmed their overall satisfaction with the group. The women were then asked to give suggestions as to how to improve the program for the next group of women. One participant suggested including information about transitional housing or shelters in the next group. The participants were also asked to complete the client's satisfaction with services (SS) portion of the CEQ. The mean of the group on this scale was 1.06 with the participants responding "Extremely Satisfied" (1) and "Very Satisfied" (2) to the questions asking about their satisfaction with the services, program, and staff particular to the life skills group.

Since the participants were satisfied with the group and the individuals showed positive changes in varying areas of their lives, it would be wise to repeat the group with a different set of female offenders at the Board of Probation and Parole. However, due to the lack of participation of the majority of the referrals and the low attendance of those who did participate, it is suggested that any further groups would have a larger pool of referrals in order to guarantee more participation. Also, if the group meeting were scheduled every week for six weeks instead

of every other week for twelve weeks, clients may be more inclined to participate and this would also serve as an easier schedule to remember.

Further research should be considered to increase the rates of success. There is presently sufficient information on females in prison and those on probation and parole (e.g. Carbone-Lopez and Kruttschnitt, 2003; Olson et al, 2000; Schram et al, 2004), but more research is needed in the area of what happens to female probationers and paroles when their supervision is done. It would be a benefit to know how they are fairing after they are released from their supervision as well as understand what had helped them in successfully completing their time.

This study suggests a possible benefit of a psycho-educational group approach for female offenders. While this study is limited by number of participants completing the program, it offers promising directions for improved outcomes for women on probation and parole. The fact that participants improved more than 20 percent on measured indicators offers hope for a more positive outlook to an otherwise at-risk population. This information may also be used to design groups for other agencies that serve female offenders.

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