Female Offenders: A Systems Perspective

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Related to female offenders, a systems perspective involves seeing the institution in a broader sociopolitical environment as well as an integral part of the community, recognizing the female offender as a temporarily displaced community member, and viewing institutionalization/community-based sanctions as a unique opportunity to reach a seriously at-risk population. According to Zaplin, this systems perspective represents a necessary mindset that criminologists, practitioners, therapists, and others working with female offenders must learn if they are going to develop relevant theory-based programs that are efficacious in positively altering female offenders’ long-term behavioral repertoires. The ultimate purpose of adopting a systems perspective is to ensure that female offenders receive interventions that are consistent with their individual rehabilitative needs, while, at the same time, correcting errant behavior, thus also meeting the collective safety needs of the community.
Introduction

One statement from a case study of a female offender reads as follows, “My mother’s sister’s husband used to molest me from the ages of nine to eleven during the summers and I felt at that point, when those things were happening, I felt ashamed . . . I felt dirty . . . I didn’t know at that point that I could do something about it. I should have told somebody.”

Having run away from home at age sixteen, this female offender engaged in prostitution and petty property crimes in order to survive. She used drugs as a coping mechanism. Another statement from her case reads as follows, “What I like about [using drugs]?—the escape. Why did I like an escape? Because all my life I disassociated without a drug, [the disassociation] was familiar, it was safe, and it was a coping mechanism. . . . [Then] I used a chemical and that chemical helped me to disassociate without me even trying to.”

One statement from another case study of a female offender reads as follows, “I always say that while growing up, the only consistency in my family was the inconsistency. There was [no consistency] and I know these things now because I've done the research within myself but while growing up I wasn't aware of them. . . . My Dad left when I was three. When I was five, I was raped.”

While these statements do not allow valid generalizations to the entire population of female offenders, they highlight variables that are not atypical of the responses female offenders give when asked about their life experiences. Helpful interventions rarely arise in their childhood. Often, when an option for help is available, because of the dynamics of abuse, their needs are misunderstood or ignored. Most of them, however, never even know that help is available. And most are from dysfunctional families where, as described in previous chapters, they have been traumatized by physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse. Suffice it to say here, most are from disadvantaged family and social environments that support criminal values, attitudes, and behavior. Family life is typically characterized by a lack of adequate care, growth-fostering relationships, and positive support or role models who can socialize them as young girls with the norms and mores that society expects. There is inconsistent use of discipline, poor supervision, and often loss or absence of parent(s)—all of which are factors that have been related to poor attachment between parent and child. Women in the criminal justice system, for example, are more likely than women in the general population to have grown up in a single-parent home and nearly six of ten women under all forms of criminal justice supervision grew up in a household where at least one parent was absent (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003).

It is not surprising that girls who grow up in this type of environment experience poor school performance, low educational aspirations and expectations, low involvement in school activities, and low school-related satisfactions and ties
of affection. In addition to not developing healthy relationships with their parent(s), they do not develop healthy relationships with their peers. Rather, these same juvenile girls bond to delinquent peers to fill the void left by their need for kinship; such relationships are one of the most important proximate causes of delinquency (Sampson & Laub, 1993). While in this society girls are generally socialized toward greater empathy toward others than boys (see Chapter 7), the life experiences of female offenders give them a distorted view of empathy and caring. As a result of their childhood experiences, they do not develop self-worth, so they are not able to feel empathic and caring attitudes toward themselves. Nor are they able to develop empathic and caring attitudes toward others. The relationships they do have are often characterized by unhealthy, codependent attitudes (Zaplin, 1998).

The emotional deprivation experienced by female offenders in their interactions with others coupled with the absence of self-worth, particularly when it is combined with serious economic and social deprivation, leads to a condition of ongoing emotional stress. When they talk about themselves, they usually express strong feelings of self-hatred, worthlessness, joylessness, dread, anxiety, and depression (see Belknap & Cady, Chapter 9). When in these emotional states, their behaviors are often aggressive and impulsive and can therefore lead to a myriad of negative consequences. Simply put, they act before they think. According to Goleman (1995), these behaviors are manifestations of both severe stress and what he calls “deficits” in emotional competencies. The result of this combination is that they often feel helpless to deal with their emotions because they lack awareness of methods to seek help as well as a baseline for judging emotional normality (see Chapter 15).

Because female offenders lack growth-fostering relationships, healthy support systems, and external resources to help them deal with the emotional toll of stress, they remain in stressful states for prolonged periods of time. In these states, working memory does not function properly; they do poorly at the task at hand, be it job assignments or homework assignments. According to Goleman (1995), when emotionally upset, people cannot attend, learn, or make decisions clearly. This is one reason why female offenders often have an inability to concentrate even in “remedial” situations, e.g., a class in basic living skills. It is not surprising that as adults—for example, as single mothers—they have great difficulty acquiring new job skills, establishing a home, or achieving economic stability. Thus, their stressful states and feelings of low self-worth are exacerbated by the fact that they either remain unemployed or work only sporadically for wages. Many turn to drugs because they have no healthy internal resources for dealing with their emotions. The fact is that most female offenders have become, or are on the road to becoming, acutely socially, politically, and economically marginalized individuals. Thus, it is extraordinarily difficult for them to remain substance free and to maintain crime-free lifestyles.
Ironically, society’s response has, for the most part, not been a rehabilitative one. Rather, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, society’s response to female offenders’ maladaptive behaviors and resulting incivilities has been to place them in institutions that, for reasons elaborated upon below, do not, for the most part, offer effective gender-specific treatment programs that adequately address their rehabilitative needs. The trend of institutionalization is worsening. The number of women who are institutionalized has grown about 10% each year since 1980 and the female inmate population continues to rise at a faster rate than the male inmate population (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2004). From June 2003 to June 2004, the number of women under the jurisdiction of state and federal prison authorities grew from 100,384 to 103,310, an increase of 2.9%. The number of men rose 2.0%. Since 1995, the annual rate of growth in the number of female inmates has averaged 5.0%, higher than the 3.3% average increase of male inmates (BJS, 2004).

In the short term, institutionalization may temporarily take female offenders out of the violence and abuse at home and on the street as well as provide less access to drugs and better access to health care. As elaborated upon further below, however, the corrections culture—based on control and security—is unlikely to provide the therapeutic milieu (Covington, 2003) required for effective holistic, gender-specific programs that adequately address female offenders’ medical and mental health rehabilitative needs, e.g., their unhealthy behavior patterns such as drug use. In addition to not contributing to the positive alteration of the behavioral repertoires of female offenders, institutionalization often exacerbates their situations, especially if they experience violence and abuse within the institutions themselves. For example, as shown in the following incident, based on an actual case file from a federal facility, sexual misconduct by staff is a serious issue in women’s prisons (Covington, 2003).

Shortly after midnight, the defendant entered the victim’s cell block area and began a conversation with her about why she was in solitary confinement. The defendant is a Lieutenant. Notably the defendant is six feet five inches and weighs over two hundred and eighty pounds. On the date of the incident, the defendant was being housed in a solitary confinement unit, having had an altercation with a prison guard. At some point during the conversation, the defendant opened the cell door, and the conversation continued with the defendant standing in the doorway, and the victim standing in the cell. The defendant began asking the victim about her sexuality, and eventually entered the cell. . . . The victim advised agents that the defendant’s weight pinned her to the bed as he raped her. The victim noted that although she was disgusted by the defendant’s advances, she made no effort to resist him because she was afraid of his size and authority.

It is important to emphasize here that the use of institutionalization solely as a punishment, and not as an opportunity to rehabilitate, defines a set of re-
lations between female offenders and their social worlds. Obviously, the relations between those institutionalized, usually against their will (a small percentage of female offenders want to be institutionalized—e.g., for protection from a battering partner or to combat drug addiction), and their keepers are structured by unequal power status. Although this fact may be unavoidable, the unequal power status reinforces the alienation of these female offenders from society. The lack of autonomy, the loss of identity, and the powerlessness associated with institutionalization may also create an exaggerated dependency on those in authority for female offenders. This situation results in women and girls leaving institutions being less able to assume responsibility for themselves and their children than when they entered. Given their maladaptive coping skills, poor self-esteem, and emotional stress, it is not surprising that many female offenders find it impossible to change themselves positively in institutionalized environments, especially if they experience violence and abuse within the institutions themselves.

It follows, then, that after returning to the environments from which they came upon their release from institutions, they are often in emotional states characterized by such feelings as anxiety and depression. Their behaviors remain aggressive and impulsive—a state conducive to continued pathological behavior including repeated criminal activity. Once released from an institutional environment that does not adequately address their rehabilitative needs inclusive of their capacity to recognize and control their emotions, female offenders demonstrate a marked tendency to resume their criminal careers and to participate in what has come to be known as “the revolving door of justice”—crime, arrest, conviction, incarceration or institutionalization, release, and return to crime—and the cycle continues (National Task Force on Correctional Substance Abuse Strategies, 1991). Thus, there is evidence that institutionalization is causing unintended consequences that actually contribute to recidivism (Butterfield, 1997). Stated another way, institutionalization of female offenders, without the treatment programs to address the root causes of their maladaptive behaviors, actually contributes to the increasing numbers of women and juveniles involved in the revolving door of the criminal and juvenile justice systems. The larger the number of female offenders institutionalized, the larger the number of female offenders who will someday be released back into their communities. If the root causes of their maladaptive behaviors are not addressed when institutionalized, they are likely to commit new crimes and be rearrested (Butterfield, 1997). A case could be made that institutionalization has created its own growth dynamic.

From a systems perspective, the institutionalization of female offenders in this country cannot be separated from the broader sociopolitical environment in which a “get tough” approach to crime exists. For example, President Nixon used the fear of violent crime in the midterm elections of 1970 (Gore, 2007).
The general public's desire for a more punitive correctional environment, also known as "zero tolerance," coupled with changes in sentencing laws has placed continued pressure on corrections departments. Sentences have increased for many crimes due, in large measure, to the determinate sentencing revolution of the 1970s and 1980s characterized by limitations on front-end judicial sentencing discretion through passage of mandatory minimum sentences for certain offenses and sentencing guidelines that narrowed the scope of unconstrained judicial sentencing discretion for all offenses (American Bar Association [ABA], 2003). California's famed "three strikes" law is only one high-profile example of such limits on judicial discretion.

Parole boards have also become much more sensitive to the public's demand for harsher treatment of criminals (Butterfield, 1997). For example, women sentenced for drug offenses only (not charged with any other type of crime) account for a substantial growth in the prison population. The net result of the major thrust of crime policy in this country has been an array of policy changes that, in the aggregate, have produced a steady, dramatic, and unprecedented increase in the population of the nation's prisons and jails (ABA, 2003)—more and more people are institutionalized regardless of age or seriousness of the crime ( Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Interestingly, the increased use of institutionalization since the 1970s and 1980s has not reduced overall crime rates in general or abated the public's fear of crime. According to a recent article in The Economist ("Bad News," 2006) on U.S. crime rates and the FBI's announcement that violent crime in the United States rose by 2.5% between 2004 and 2005,

Americans worry about crime. In a big country with hyperactive media, any sensational horror is quickly broadcast from coast to coast, making many people nervous. Last year, for example, after a teenager shot dead ten people in and around a Minnesota high school, pollsters asked a sample of Americans how likely it was that a similar massacre might occur in their own town. Nearly three-quarters said it was “very” or “somewhat” likely.

Increases in institutionalization cannot be explained by increases in female crime patterns; women and girls still typically commit nonviolent and less serious crimes than men and boys. Female offenders tend to show violence only to themselves. In spite of this fact, it seems unlikely that public opinion, stoked by the media, will change the lock-'em-up approach to crime. This projection is based on the simple fact that, even in the years when crimes rates were falling, e.g., in 2003, more and more tough sentencing laws were taking effect. Even worse, the "get tough" laws rarely include a commensurate increase in funding for the institutions that will need to house the additional inmates, forcing jurisdictions to cope with their rising costs by reducing staff and cutting out the very programs that provide the only rehabilitative aspects of institutionalization.
The problem of institutionalization that is not inclusive of holistic, gender-specific treatment goes beyond the fact that institutionalization fails to rehabilitate. Female offenders are often sent to facilities that cannot even accommodate them properly. The environments in which they are housed are punishing in their own right (National Criminal Justice Association [NCJA], 1997). In addition, because most states have fewer facilities for female offenders than are available for male offenders, they are often relocated hours away from their homes. This logistical separation from their families can be particularly problematic when mothers are moved far from their children.

Institutionalized women are most often mothers, consider themselves the primary nurturers for their children, and therefore suffer severe psychological consequences when confronted with the loss of love and family (see Chapter 17 for further discussion). To exacerbate matters, passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) in 1997 increased the risk of permanent termination of the parent-child relationship. This legislation allows states to file for termination of parental rights if a child has been in foster care for 15 or more of 22 consecutive months (Covington, 2003). The negative impact that female offenders’ children may suffer from the loss of their mother from their lives does not bode well for breaking the cycle of maladapted children growing up in households devoid of parental attachment. During the 1990s, as the nation’s prison population increased by 50%, the number of children who had a parent in prison increased by the same proportion—from 1 million to 1.5 million children. These children represent 2 percent of all minor children in America, and 7 percent of all African American children (Travis & Waul, 2003).

It is also troubling that, although rehabilitation programs may exist for women and delinquent girls in institutions, they are usually not comparable in quality to those provided to male offenders and delinquent boys. Even in those cases where female offenders appear to be receiving lighter sentences, it must be borne in mind, as stated, that they generally commit less-serious and less-violent crimes than male offenders, and, by virtue of the inadequate facilities and rehabilitative services that are characteristic of their terms of institutionalization, they are in fact being sentenced more harshly. That is to say, female offenders are punished more severely than are their male counterparts because of how they are institutionalized (NCJA, 1997). And, they are not even provided with the same rehabilitative opportunities as male offenders who have committed more-serious offenses and have longer sentences.

Additionally, as discussed, power relations are not consistent with or supportive of programs and rehabilitative environments, nor do they foster relationships and the development of self-respect or empowerment (Hannah-Moffat, 1995). It is not surprising that in such environments, female offenders will typically not be receptive to treatment. That is to say, even if holistic, gender-specific rehabilitative
programs are available, their efficacy will likely be undermined by the social structure of the institutional environment as it exists today. Thus, for most female offenders, punishments rendered in institutional environments are not conducive to addressing their rehabilitative needs even in the best of circumstances.

While a strong argument can be made on humanitarian and social welfare grounds alone to develop rehabilitative programs that will positively address the maladaptive behaviors of female offenders, there are also pressing practical reasons to do so. The logic is simple. These maladaptive behaviors, if not corrected, often produce unintended criminogenic effects because the marginality of the offender is exacerbated. With the expected huge influx of female offenders over the next few years as more and more tough sentencing laws are likely to take effect, institutional beds will become an even more scarce and expensive resource that should be allocated in a judicious manner for those who need this level of control and sanction (Zaplin, 1998). Therefore, on a very practical level, it is urgent that the maladaptive behaviors of female offenders are corrected by addressing their root causes.

### A Systems Perspective

Clearly, the life of the female offender is embedded in a complex social reality encompassing her relationships, personal history, and the many contextual, sociological forces inducing her criminality. The prospects for her rehabilitation and reintegration into society cannot validly be disentangled from this context. If the complexity is ignored, the purposes of any intervention program will be frustrated. The complexity can also appear to be overwhelming for treatment providers.

The systems perspective, based on general systems theory, provides powerful language, concepts, and tools that make it possible to think and talk in a disciplined and detailed manner about female offenders without undue simplification—that is, not only in the context of a female’s individual characteristics (how she “hangs together”) but in the context of complex systems of interactions, interventions, and influences. This perspective is inclusive of, among other things, the interrelationship of the characteristics of the female offender herself, the impact of informal social controls, the nature of her criminal offenses, services designed for her, the characteristics of the correctional institutions and agencies that deliver these services, and the external sociopolitical environment of these institutions and agencies including the role of policy makers and legislators, and the society at large. It is suggested here that this systems perspective represents a necessary mindset that criminologists, practitioners, therapists, and others working with female offenders must learn if they are going to develop relevant theory-based programs that are efficacious in positively altering long-term behavioral repertoires (see Chapter 4).
General systems theory grew out of the effort to understand phenomena displaying a multiplicity of variables—and to understand them, not by analyzing the variables as separate entities but by attending to the interaction of these variables (Macy, 1991). Specifically, it came out of biology and the work of von Bertalanffy (1968), who needed to go beyond the one-way causal paradigm of classical science to an understanding of whole processes as they naturally occurred in the phenomenal world. Von Bertalanffy found that wholes, be they animal or vegetable, cell, organ, or organism, could best be described as systems. A system is less a thing than a pattern consisting of a dynamic flow of interactions between variables including the larger environment (Macy, 1991).

Examples of systems include biological organisms (including human bodies), the atmosphere, diseases, ecological niches, factories, chemical reactions, political entities, communities, industries, families, teams—and all organizations (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994). These systems are consistent with the concepts of patterns, totality, feedback, self-stabilization and differentiation, information flow, and transformation (Macy, 1991) and what Senge et al. (1994, pp. 87–88) call “the world as if through a wide angle, not a telephoto lens.” In terms of the female offender, the systems perspective means looking at her from a nonreductive point of view—that is, not focusing exclusively on the symptoms of her drug problem, for example, but pushing beyond to assess the underlying causes of her drug problem.

The field of systems theory also includes: cybernetics and chaos theory, gestalt theory, the work of Gregory Bateson, Russell Ackoff, Eric Trist, and the Santa Fe Institute. Because of their utility, systems-cybernetic concepts have rapidly spread beyond the natural and life sciences and the work of von Bertalanffy, Norbert Wiener, and others, to the worlds of psychology and sociology. More and more areas of life were seen as manifesting systemic properties, and the system, as a new way of seeing, was found applicable to the human being—not just as a biological phenomenon but as a social and cognitive entity (Macy, 1991). In terms of psychology, individuals could be seen as systems composed of inner experiences in open interaction with their worlds, and, ultimately, being transformed by this interaction. The world of inner, subjective experience is accepted by systems theorists as a given that must be understood in its own right, and the processes of which can be made intelligible.

The systems perspective was also adopted by those undertaking business process reengineering (BPA), which gained popularity in the 1990s as a way to model, streamline, and improve the processes that constitute extremely complex business operations. This approach enables analysts to affect the factors with the most impact on an organization-wide end goal, such as reducing costs, lead time, or quality problems. All of the diverse approaches described have one guiding premise in common: behavior of all systems follows certain common principles, the nature of which can be discovered and articulated (Senge et al., 1994).
The tools of systems thinking are causal loop diagrams, archetypes, and computer models. They are useful in bringing the relatively abstract notions presented here about the nature and pattern of female offending down to earth by enabling us to talk about the female offender and the rehabilitative interventions and causal influences as one common process. One tool of systems thinking, the feedback model (see Figure 3-1), provides a theoretical framework that is extremely useful for constructing a coherent description of the female offender herself, her interrelationship with the key components of the criminal justice system, and the factors leading to and maintaining maladaptive behavior.

**Figure 3-1 A Systems Framework of Female Offender Maladaptive Behavior**

**Inputs:**
- Family environment
- Socio-economic conditions
- Traumatic events
- Educational opportunities

- Sentence
- Policies & procedures
- Resources
- Punish vs. rehab. goals

- Laws
- Political environment
- Sentencing guidelines
- Available correctional alternatives
- Legal representation

**Possible Outputs:**
- Norms & mores
- Emotional intelligence
- Self-esteem
- Addictions

- Modified mental health
- Negative reinforcement
- Job/Life skills
- Detachment from Family/Community

**1. Juvenile Female Development**
- Socialization
- School experiences
- Individual characteristics
- Mental health
- Peer influences
- Drug use

- Norms & mores
- Emotional intelligence
- Self-esteem
- Addictions

**Possible Outputs:**
- Norms & mores
- Emotional intelligence
- Self-esteem
- Addictions

**2. Maladaptive Behavior**
- Criminal behavior
- Delinquent behavior, e.g., running away, curfew violations, incorrigibility
- Substance abuse

- Diversion
- Probation
- Detention/Airrest

**Possible Outputs:**
- Diversion
- Probation
- Detention/Airrest

**3. Judicial Response**
- Adjudication
- Intermediate sanctions
- Institutionalism
- Diversion

- Pre-adjudication
- Adjudicated sentencing
- Criminal record
- Public shame

**Possible Outputs:**
- Pre-adjudication
- Adjudicated sentencing
- Criminal record
- Public shame

**Inputs:**
- Norms & mores
- Emotional intelligence
- Self-esteem
- Addictions
- Situational circumstances

- Positive feedback loop
- Negative feedback loop

**Yes**
- Break the maladaptive cycle?

**No** (negative feedback loop)

**Yes** (positive feedback loop)
- Break the maladaptive cycle?
and human services systems that she necessarily encounters, and how she is transformed (positively or negatively) by these encounters, as a single process. It is also useful for constructing a coherent description of the female offender and her world as an ongoing process. For example, the process would include how she moves through a single component (e.g., a jail or a detention center) and enters another (e.g., a day reporting program), and how various components within a system must coordinate with and be aware of other components’ strategies toward the rehabilitative intervention to ensure effectiveness.

Translating this theoretical perspective into viable programs that address the rehabilitative needs of female offenders on a practical level requires a broad-based, intra- and interagency approach guided by distinctive policies and practices. Female offenders are often on the caseloads of one or more human service providers when they become involved with the justice system. Efforts to change errant behavioral repertoires often require services and treatment that are provided by non-criminal justice agencies. For this reason, the systems perspective is inclusive of a wide circle of potential community corrections partners extending beyond traditional corrections and inclusive of public human service agencies. Examples of the types of organizations that must work as partners include those that provide mental health services; alcohol and other drug programs; programs for survivors of family and sexual violence; family service agencies; emergency shelter; food and financial assistance programs; educational, vocational, and employment services; health care services; the child welfare system; transportation; child care; children’s services; educational organizations; self-help groups; organizations that provide leisure options; faith-based organizations; and community service clubs (Covington, 2003).

By adopting a systems perspective, beyond seeing the pattern of interrelationships inclusive of the attributes of people, institutions, agencies, and the society at large, those working with female offenders will also be able to see how these forces interact, shape, affect, and condition one another reciprocally. It also becomes possible to see patterns of causality—the cycles of cause and effect that make up systems (Senge et al., 1994). These circles or spirals of interaction are characterized by constant feedback and adjustment. In such a perspective, details come to be understood as aspects of a coherent picture of forces at play.

According to Senge (2006), seeing patterns of interdependency and seeing into the future are two vital systems-thinking skills. Senge states:

> Once people start to see systemic patterns and understand the forces driving a system, they also start to see where the system is headed if nothing changes... "Seeing into the future" is not a prediction in the statistical sense; it is simply seeing how a system is functioning and where it is headed. ... The inability or unwillingness to see where we are headed is a massive failure of leadership foresight. (p. 22)
In this regard, Senge (2006, p. 23) suggests that a “race to the bottom” metaphor is useful. What happens if the lock-'em-up approach to crime continues? Clearly there is increasing urgency for legislators, public administrators, and correctional experts to think about what the bottom means to them and their organizations, and to realize why our current correctional policies and practices may not be viable in the future.

The Case for Community-Based Sanctions

Given the nature of crimes committed by the majority of female offenders—minor property crimes and substance abuse offenses—community-based sanctions that address individual needs and require a greater commitment on the part of the offender than is required by institutionalization can optimally challenge most women and girls to learn to cope with the community environment. In general, community-based sanctions can, if done well, provide graduated levels of supervision. They range from simple probation at the least restrictive end of the criminal justice continuum and include a variety of community-based sanctions such as work release, electronic monitoring, day reporting, and community service.

Community-based sanctions, done well, can address the maladaptive behaviors of the female offender using the least intrusive interventions designed to change the behaviors that lead to criminal activity. They offer other benefits, not only to female offenders and their children, but also to society (Covington, 2003). One survey compared the average annual cost of an individual’s probation with the costs of jailing or imprisoning that person. While the cost of probation is roughly $869, the cost for jail is $14,363 and for prison, $17,794 (Covington, 2003). According to Covington (2003), “Community sanctions are less disruptive to women than incarceration and subject them to less isolation. Furthermore, community corrections potentially create far less disruption in the lives of female offenders’ children” (p. 86). It is suggested here and throughout this book that these kinds of programs have the greatest potential for addressing the rehabilitative needs of the female offender because they can provide the most comprehensive continuum of care when interconnected well with community-based organizations. This continuum of care, to be optimally effective, should encompass gender-specific and culturally competent services inclusive of the female offender’s complex health, mental health, educational, and social needs.

This continuum of services should be delivered in a systematic and integrated fashion through cooperative efforts of a broad range of community constituencies and agencies whose goal it is to achieve a rehabilitative societal response to female offenders’ maladaptive behavior. This response needs to occur not just at an operational level but at a policy level as well. For example, at the policy level, constituencies and agencies should develop memoranda of un-
derstanding or more formal interagency agreements regarding their respective roles and responsibilities. They should develop guidelines for sharing information and coordinating activities that address the rehabilitative needs of female offenders. These agreements should include a commitment to conduct joint, informational meetings, ongoing formal forums among correctional and treatment providers, and joint or cross-training efforts (National Task Force on Correctional Substance Abuse Strategies, 1991).

At the operational level, staff linkages among constituencies and agencies are important, not only to implement policy agreements but to develop channels for enhanced working relationships. Enhanced working relationships can often mean the difference between successful and unsuccessful rehabilitative outcomes for female offenders. Joint staff meetings, mutual goal setting for female offenders, and case staffings are excellent opportunities to develop linkages at the operational level. In small agencies, in particular, cooperative arrangements with a variety of entities may be the only way to ensure that needed rehabilitative services can be provided (National Task Force on Correctional Substance Abuse Strategies, 1991).

The ultimate purpose of adopting a systems perspective is to ensure that female offenders receive interventions that are consistent with their individual rehabilitative needs, while, at the same time, correcting errant behavior, thus meeting the collective safety needs of the community. Adopting a systems perspective will also ensure that service delivery is not hampered by opposing treatment philosophies; it allows for the placement of multiple philosophies into a single model.

A distinctive quality of a systems perspective is the coordination of a multidisciplinary staff. Treatment providers should be required, on a regular basis, to jointly discuss assessment findings and develop treatment services based on each female offender's rehabilitative needs. At these meetings, each treatment plan should be updated to ensure that female offenders are receiving the optimum level of service delivery.

According to the National Task Force on Correctional Substance Abuse Strategies (1991), it is counterproductive to place individuals in programs that are not designed to meet their individual rehabilitative needs in terms of, for example, substance abuse severity, mental health disorders, criminality, and so on. Overprogramming and underprogramming of individuals can also yield negative results. Excessive programming for a specific individual can cause the individual to drop out of treatment as well as waste limited treatment resources. Insufficient programming may allow the individual to complete treatment without receiving sufficient intervention for real change.

Unfortunately, because of the “get tough” approach to crime, few jurisdictions can boast at this time the long-term effectiveness of an interconnected,
graduated range of community-based sanctions and treatment needs—based options developed from a systems perspective. According to McGarry (1993),

It is not the failure of the programs—in number, inventiveness, or sophistication—that has produced ineffective and frustrating results, but rather the failure of the system that surrounds them to behave as a system. These failures include: lack of communication among the actors and agencies about the capabilities and limitations of sentencing options; the absence of an agreement on specific populations and outcomes for which these options are best suited; a lack of information about the sentencing process and of hard data about the offenders who come through it; and most importantly, the absence of a vision or articulated mission for the entire sanctioning enterprise. (p. 12)

Thus, creating these systems of rehabilitative service delivery in a jurisdiction requires consistent communication focused on the development of both a range of rehabilitative program options and a coherent policy to guide their use (McGarry, 1993). In order to foster positive rehabilitative outcomes, this policy needs to emphasize that programs for female offenders should foster relationships, promote personal dignity, honor diversity, and support families and communities, while promoting public safety (Intermediate Sanctions for Female Offenders Policy Group, 1995). In summary, community-based sanctions are needed that are sensitive to women’s and girls’ unique needs and strengths and guided by an articulate and well-integrated policy framework.

It is important to emphasize here that increased research and knowledge of gender differences in behavioral, cognitive, moral, and emotional development—for example, relational theory—has provided new frameworks for understanding female development and should be incorporated into both policy development and rehabilitative programs for female offenders (Coll & Duff, 1995). A principal contribution of the systems perspective is to identify ways in which effective programs can integrate needed rehabilitative components that are holistic and gender-specific.

One factor associated with failure of rehabilitative programs for female offenders has to do with the fact that they are often incorporated into generic programs that make no gender distinctions. This is sometimes because of lack of funding and sometimes results from the impracticality of creating programs for relatively small numbers of female offenders. Too often, however, the generic approach reflects a lack of knowledge and a failure to grasp the importance of services that address gender-specific, rehabilitative needs.

It is imperative at this time to consider female and male offenders separately when developing and implementing rehabilitative programs and the policy that guides them. That this is of particular relevance in developing community-based sanction options for women and girls is supported by theories of moral devel-
Kohlberg's (1981) model of moral development, which has been effective in elucidating the attitudes of men, for example, is demonstrably deficient in encompassing the moral attitudes of women. Carol Gilligan (1982) has provided a model of an independent, developmental moral pathway for women. Given the growing numbers of female offenders in criminal justice systems across the country, such considerations are increasingly urgent.

Some generalizations can be made with respect to holistic, gender-specific, rehabilitative interventions for female offenders. In general, these types of interventions should:

- Apply relational theory on a systems-wide basis.
- Deal with the effects of early physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and the resulting trauma.
- Increase female offenders' awareness of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of themselves and others.
- Transmit shared cultural values.
- Help mainstream female offenders into the society at large by strengthening their membership in family and community.

Specifically, these types of interventions should, in addition to addressing female offenders' substance abuse, trauma, and mental health issues, raise their level of: (1) social and emotional competencies, and (2) education/employability. Raising their level of social and emotional competencies encompasses teaching self-awareness, personal decision-making, stress management, communications, personal responsibility, and creative conflict resolution. Self-awareness includes learning how to identify and manage feelings, as well as building a vocabulary for expressing them. Personal decision-making includes examining actions and knowing their consequences. Stress management includes learning stress reduction techniques as well as how to manage emotions (see Chapter 15). Empathy includes learning how to take the perspective of others and how to communicate about feelings effectively. Personal responsibility includes recognizing the consequences of decisions and actions. And finally, creative conflict resolution includes being assertive rather than angry or passive and learning the arts of cooperation, conflict resolution, and negotiating compromise.

Because most female offenders did not complete high school, raising their educational level encompasses the basic General Equivalency Diploma (GED) curriculum and other basic educational curriculums inclusive of life skills classes and job readiness training. For those female offenders who have their high school diploma and/or basic job skills, college courses as well as more technical and advanced job training should be made available and encouraged. This will help women to get out of the lower-paying, gender-stereotyped jobs.
Because most female offenders are (or will be) mothers who grew up in dysfunctional families, their education should also include parenting classes and parent support groups (see Chapter 17).

To facilitate the rehabilitative process, staff and mentors (see Chapter 19) who exemplify individual strength and growth while also providing caring support can be extremely important in helping female offenders to build healthy connections and remove barriers to their rehabilitation. Staff and mentors will be successful in understanding the behavior and needs of the women and girls they work with to the extent that they can respond empathetically to the inner subjective experience of each female offender’s construction of her world. They need emotional support and an understanding of the cultural and relational contexts in which they grow, develop, and change (Coll & Duff, 1995).

Finally, if there is no tolerance in the system for relapse and relearning as part of the rehabilitative process, individual transformation will be thwarted, resulting in a negative feedback loop from a systems perspective. Rehabilitative programs must integrate and provide for long-term “hurdle-help” (described in Chapter 4), including substance abuse education and treatment—an essential factor to address female offenders’ chemical dependency problems effectively.

In a positive feedback loop, in order to make new data meaningful and usable, new constructs must evolve over time. With these new constructs, the system—the female offender herself in this case—can alter and refine her map of the world. This corresponds to the process of learning. This learning is enhanced when the female offender is provided the opportunities to participate in treatment and is ready to try an alternative lifestyle.

In conclusion, community-based alternatives to institutionalization—interconnected well with treatment programs that are themselves interconnected well within the larger community—can offer a positive learning opportunity in the life of the female offender. It can be more than just a time for her to “clean up, detox and stabilize” (Intermediate Sanctions for Female Offenders Policy Group, 1995). It can be a time for her to grow and break the cycle of recidivism for herself, and possibly even for her children.

### Management and Leadership Considerations

Female offenders, as part of their rehabilitative process, need to be empowered and made confident about their capacity to deal with the larger social world. This is not an easy task. Multiple trauma histories create multifaceted problems. From a systems perspective, multifaceted problems require a holistic, multifaceted response in terms of rehabilitative programming and opportunities designed to address them. Designing effective, multifaceted programs for female offenders that promote a sense of well-being, prompt ability to take action, and
increase self-worth in participants, also requires creativity. Specifically, it requires that the staff that designs these programs maintain a systems perspective, incorporating the relevant management principles.

The heart of the approach to management suggested is that the effective and responsible agency be designed so that it can learn from its own experience and, therefore, able to manifest constant growth in the quality of the services it delivers. Such an agency has the highest probability of delivering those services that will ultimately integrate the female offender into society as a contributing member. Agencies that are oriented in this way are organized as horizontal systems of racially and ethnically diverse individuals, rather than as vertical systems of racially and ethnically homogeneous individuals, so common in hierarchically structured management organizations.

Horizontal, systems-oriented agencies enable team members to manifest a commitment to constant growth and learning. Toward this end, both teamwork and the taking of individual initiatives to achieve desired results are stressed. In point of fact, one cannot maintain a systems perspective as an individual, not because systems thinking is so difficult, but because good results in a complex system depend on bringing in as many perspectives as possible (Senge et al., 1994). Team members are encouraged to take responsibility, propose and implement cross-functional solutions, and to be the inspiration for the organization. To do so, team members must (Lencioni, 2002):

- Trust one another.
- Engage in unfiltered conflict around ideas.
- Commit to decisions and plans of action.
- Hold one another accountable for delivering against those plans.
- Focus on the achievement of collective results.

Truly cohesive team members are on the front line, constantly refining existing services and implementing new projects and new directions of development with community-wide support and resources.

Leadership is at the core of horizontal, systems-oriented agencies. Leaders create the environment of trust and set the tone for a focus on results. Leaders must personally model appropriate behavior, push team members for closure around issues, as well as require adherence to goals that the team has set. Most importantly, the leader must create an organizational culture of team accountability and be willing to serve as the ultimate arbiter of discipline if the team itself fails (Lencioni, 2002).

Although the above might seem to some an idealistic and impractical requirement, in practice, experiences with such organizational structures are quite positive. Such organizations increase the likelihood that the female offender will
receive those rehabilitative services guided by a policy framework that ultimately inspires her to acquire needed skills and take advantage of the opportunities that she needs to be successful in reintegrating into society.

Workers at such agencies respond to the opportunities and challenges with eagerness. This response is the path of growth both for the workers and for the agency. Participants find creative means to pool their diverse functions and talents, contributing to a constantly evolving, integrative, supportive whole—what Senge et al. (1994) call a learning organization.

### Conclusion

It is a common finding in system analysis that intervening to prevent an undesirable action as early as possible in the process typically costs only a small fraction of addressing that same problem further downstream. In the case of a girl who could be removed from a physically abusive home at a young age, the costs in terms of dollars and other negative social costs may be only a small percentage of the costs of treating her through a lifetime of mental health, substance abuse, and physical health problems and institutionalizing her for maladaptive behaviors.

Antisocial behavior in children is one of the best predictors of antisocial behavior in adults. However, most antisocial children do not become antisocial as adults (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Further, while adult criminality seems to be preceded by the characteristic of childhood misconduct, research has established large variations in later adolescent and adult criminal behavior that are not directly accounted for by childhood propensities (Sampson & Laub, 1993). These facts imply that individuals do not remain constant in their behavior over time and further imply that intra-individual change is possible. It follows that if intra-individual change is possible, it is critical that female offenders have the opportunity to integrate into an appropriate array of holistic, gender-specific rehabilitative services that address individual needs in order to facilitate positive change.

When attempting to elicit this positive change, one concept must be remembered: how female offenders respond to their environment is determined by their individual life experiences, which are embedded in a broader sociological context. Therefore, when developing rehabilitative programs for this population, a systems perspective is recommended to ensure that the interventions—and the policies that guide them—adapt and change to meet the individualized needs of each female offender within the broad spectrum of her interrelationships. This is a difficult and arduous task to undertake, yet we have no choice. According to Senge et al. (1994), “The long term, most insidious consequence of applying nonsystemic solutions [to problems], is increased need for more and more of the solution,” what Senge calls “short-term improvements leading to long-term dependency.”
Senge explained that “the phenomenon of short-term improvements leading to long-term dependency is so common, it has its own name among systems thinkers—it’s called “Shifting the Burden to the Intervener.”

In the case of female crime and delinquency, as a society, we have shifted the burden from, in the words of Belknap and Holsinger (Chapter 1), “failing to adequately treat them for incest, nonsexual physical abuse, witnessing the battering of their mothers, witnessing general violence (including murder) in their neighborhoods, and so on” to institutions. Without the systems perspective, we continue to fail to address the pattern of interrelationships between high rates of violence in the home, criminalizing of girls for running away from these abusive homes, and the consequences of institutionalization. In this case, more and more of the solution means that the revolving door of crime will become a mainstay in our society.

Without adopting and implementing a systems perspective, programs will continue to fall short of meeting the specific needs of female offenders and addressing their maladaptive behaviors. Ultimately, what happens if we, as a society, choose not to learn the tools of systems thinking? Not only will we not address the root causes of female offenders’ maladaptive behaviors, we will often exacerbate these behaviors by warehousing them in institutions. We will fail to have a lasting impact on deterring future crime and delinquency.

In the concluding portion of Chapter 1, Belknap and Holsinger cited Linda Albrecht, who warned that “making a ‘bad’ program ‘gender-specific’ was not going to make the program ‘good.’” Albrecht also stressed the need to approach delinquent girls “as a whole package, not in a compartmentalized way.” In this chapter, Zaplin described how the systems perspective and the tools of systems thinking, including the feedback loop, can greatly facilitate seeing the female offender as a “whole package.”

Systems thinking is a conceptual framework—a body of knowledge and tools—that has been developed over the past fifty years for the purpose of helping us see holistically. The logic of systems thinking is straightforward: if we can see patterns of interrelationships clearly, we can change the causes of undesirable patterns effectively, thereby producing long-lasting improvement. It is an extremely useful perspective for looking at a myriad of complex issues such as how female offenders, the criminal justice system, and the larger society are bound by interrelated forces that often take years to play out fully. Without the systems perspective, it is
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difficult to understand the important interrelationships that foster crime such as physical and/or sexual abuse, socio-economic disadvantage, mental health and drug issues, and the associated impulsiveness that can lead to juvenile delinquency. Ultimately, without this perspective, there is no understanding of the interplay of forces that must be mastered to enable female offenders to avoid criminal behavior.
REFERENCES


