

Focus on female offenders: the Real Women Programme – Probation Service pilot

Patterns of Crime
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Focus on female offenders: the Real Women Programme – Probation Service pilot

Summary

- This development and practice report summarises lessons learned from a study that examined the pilot implementation of the Real Women Programme. Feedback from programme tutors and participants was collected along with administrative data on the offender characteristics.
- The Real Women Programme is a group work programme designed for acquisitive female offenders. It was commissioned by the National Probation Directorate to address the needs of a large number of women serving a community sentence for an acquisitive offence, and to address concerns about existing offending behaviour programmes, designed for men, being used with female offenders.
- The programme consists of 31 sessions divided into three phases. It uses a variety of approaches and novel techniques to address the offenders' relationships, roles, duties, self-esteem, and problem-solving skills with specific relevance to the role of women in society.
- Tutors and offenders participating in the pilot of the Real Women Programme expressed positive views about the programme and its relevance and impact on their lives.
- Issues relating to programme training and content were identified as needing to be addressed before the programme is rolled out nationally.

The effectiveness of the programme will also need to be examined with an evaluation of reoffending and other relevant outcomes.

Home Office Development and Practice Reports draw out from research the messages for practice development, implementation and operation. They are intended as guidance for practitioners in specific fields. The recommendations explain how and why changes could be made, based on the findings from research, which would lead to better practice.

1. Introduction

The Real Women Acquisitive Offender Programme is an offending behaviour programme designed exclusively for female offenders. A decision was made by the National Probation Directorate to focus on acquisitive offending. This was because these offences are by far the most common offences for female offenders in the community with just under half of women serving a community sentence doing so for acquisitive crime (Hedderman, 2000; Home Office, 1998). Thus the majority of female offenders would qualify for a programme targeting acquisitive offending and also be targeted on a programme with a common element to their offending. Until now, women have usually participated in general offending behaviour programmes (Think First, Enhanced Thinking Skills, Reasoning and Rehabilitation and Priestley One-to-One) which were initially designed for male offenders and may therefore not be directly transferable to female offenders. As part of the drive towards establishing an evidence-base for working with minority offenders, the National Probation Directorate commissioned this specialist programme for female offenders. This was to be developed on the basis of the best available evidence on what is effective with female offenders, while recognising that the evidence-base is not strong.

The theory manual for the Real Women Programme recognises that the programme itself, although based on the available evidence, contains elements that need to be tested. This is because much of the research on women offenders has produced inconsistent findings about the factors associated with offending and because the 'What Works' literature is mainly drawn from evaluations of programmes for men (Hedderman, 2000). Dowden and Andrews (1999) found little research on the effectiveness of correctional treatment for female offenders. Their meta-analysis of 24 studies, involving women, found that the criminogenic needs most highly correlated with effect size were programmes targeting interpersonal criminogenic needs (i.e. family and peers, family process, and antisocial associates). This suggests that programmes designed for female offenders should target these needs. Group work programmes for female offenders have also generally been conducted in mixed sex groups although there have been some conducted in female-only groups. The Real Women Programme is designed for female-only groups, as women may do less well in mixed gender groups. Sentencers' use of custody for women may also be curbed if they have an alternative disposal specific to female offenders.

The main themes of the Real Women Programme are to assist female offenders to understand beliefs that are supportive of offending, to re-examine their motives and to re-evaluate the potential consequences of their actions, as well as to develop the skills to seek fresh and realistic alternatives. The materials to achieve this represent a new approach to offending behaviour programmes in the UK. They combine cognitive-behavioural approaches with tenets of rational emotive behavioural therapy, through a range of innovative materials. These materials include thought cards (Appendix 1) that are packs of little cards with statements designed to make the women think about themselves and how they feel. Reflection sheets (Appendix 2) are worksheets for the offenders to fill in after the sessions, to help them relate the materials covered in the session to their own lives, and reflect on how they could do things otherwise to incorporate the lessons learned. A set of five composite women, the "Group of Five" (Appendix 3) are also used to exemplify the challenges and problems faced by women in society. The Group of Five used in the programme are the result of morphing profiles of a large number of real female offenders (from Canada), and as such are not fictional characters. The Group of Five go through the programme with the group, progressing as the group progresses.

When the programme was presented to the Correctional Services Accreditation Panel (CSAP) comments were made by members of the Panel that these materials, whilst exciting, were largely unproven to be effective as there is little evidence one way or the other. This evaluation looked at the offenders' and tutors' experiences of them.

The programme consisted of 31, two-hour sessions divided into three phases. Phase one (sessions 1-10) was designed to motivate offenders to think about change by considering the long- and short-term costs and benefits of their behaviour. Phase 2, (sessions 11-21) to help offenders prepare for and begin the change-process, and Phase 3 (sessions 12-31) was designed to maintain change and prevent relapse. The programme made use of a variety of approaches to address the offenders' relationships, roles, duties, self-esteem, and problem-solving skills with specific relevance to the role of women in society.

This evaluation is a process evaluation of the implementation and roll-out of the programme in three pilot areas.

2. Methods

The study gathered feedback from programme tutors and offenders through a series of semi-structured interviews with 15 members of staff and 33 offenders taking part in the programme (including 11 offenders who were interviewed twice).

Eight members of staff were interviewed at the mid-programme stage, in five of the groups, and seven at the end-programme stage, in three of the groups. The mid-programme interviews with tutors focused on the pre-programme phase, i.e. the training and the preparations made before the programme was run, and also the early part of the programme. The end-interviews were intended to get an overview of the programme as a whole, the effect of the refresher training for staff in January 2003, and the latter part of the programme. Tutors were interviewed both at the mid-point and at the end to see whether the opinions of the programme changed in the course of delivering it.

Eighteen offenders were interviewed at the mid-programme stage in five of the six groups and 15 offenders at the end-programme stage in four groups. Offenders were interviewed at the mid- and end-points to see whether the opinions of those receiving the programme changed, and also to try to include some offenders at the mid-point who would not complete the programme.

However, all offenders except one interviewed at the mid-point went on to complete successfully.

In addition, administrative data about the offenders and their programme attendance was collected to explore factors associated with programme attrition. It was not possible to identify and interview offenders who dropped out of the programme due to difficulties in locating offenders. The administrative data collected is set out below:

- CRN
 - Name
 - Address
 - Date of birth
 - Race and ethnicity
 - Offence
 - Disposal/order
 - Added requirements
 - Commencement date of order
 - OGRS2 score
 - Programme start date
 - Last session attended (date and session no.)
 - Programme attendance record
- Any assessment of problems and criminogenic needs.

3. Results

Sample

The women had received their community sentences for theft (6/22), fraud/deception (5/22), drugs offences (4/22), violence (3/22) and motoring, offences (1/22), with three offenders missing this information. For race and ethnicity, the offenders referred to the first set of groups were largely white (48/61, 79%), with ten unknown and one black offender, one mixed race offender and one Chinese offender.

Offender characteristics

Overall, 61 offenders were referred to the programme. In all, there were seven ethnic minority offenders amongst those who completed the programme across the seven groups, and the tutors said they felt the ethnic minority offenders were able to fully participate in the programme, and that the programme was suitable for offenders from all backgrounds. There were however some requests for an Asian woman to be included in the Group of Five, to reflect the large Asian communities in parts of the country.

In the course of the programme a lot of issues are raised in discussions, often relating to abuse or domestic violence, but the groups tended to work together to support each other. This does have an impact on the timing and the structure of the sessions and the programme. This was an issue the tutors thought the programme developers should consider in their expectations for session length.

Literacy was raised as a potentially problematic issue by several tutors. Whilst the literacy skills in some of the groups were good, other groups found that they were struggling and everything had to be read out loud. One group was considering taping the sessions, in order to have the tapes of the reading materials and hand-outs for offenders who were struggling with the literacy demands. Most of the tutors felt that the literacy demanded by some of the worksheets and materials was greater than those made by other programmes.

Findings: Attendance

The levels of attrition varied greatly. When the rates of attrition are combined with the delay from the commencement of the order there is no obvious relation between delay and completion of the programme. The proportions of offenders in each of the delay bands were very similar for the completers and non-completers, although there were more offenders with delays of six to 12-plus months in the non-completer group. However, the

majority of offenders, completers and non-completers, commenced the programme within six months of beginning their community sentence.

Tutors did not perceive any issues or characteristics particular to the offenders who completed the programme or to those who dropped out, although issues of substance misuse problems and childcare were raised. One tutor simply commented that the offenders dropping out seemed to have slightly more problems than those who completed, but there were no clear patterns.

Findings: The impact of the Real Women Programme--- – offenders' views

When asked whether the programme had a positive or negative impact on them, the majority of offenders interviewed thought the programme had a positive impact on them. Very few said they thought the programme had a negative impact (one offender said she felt depressed after every session) and four had no comment.

One group was initially ambivalent about the impact of the programme, and at the end was largely positive.

The offenders interviewed were quite positive about the relevance of the programme to them personally but were generally undecided as to the relevance of the programme to their offence.

Whilst the majority of tutors interviewed felt that the programme had a very positive impact on the women who completed it, two tutors were unconvinced of the usefulness of the programme, and expressed a preference for the female version of the general offending behaviour programme, Women's Think First. The positive comments about the Real Women Programme referred to the impact on the women in terms of the skills they acquired and the way the programme related to the women's lives outside the programme. Improvements in the offenders' relationships, decision-making, interaction with others, self-esteem, and sense of empowerment were amongst those identified in the offenders.

Another impact of the programme was through its function as a social support group. Amongst the women who completed the programme the tutors sensed a great deal of camaraderie and some groups had made arrangements for continuing to meet after the programme ended. Several tutors voiced some concern about the end of the programme meaning that a lot of the women would lose a social group on which they had come to depend in the course of the three and a half months the programme took to finish.

Findings: Contents and materials

The single most consistent piece of feedback received during interviews in all three areas was that there was too much to be covered in each session. Designed to be two hours long, the sessions rarely finished in less than two and a half hours, and even then they were rushed. Some tutors recognised that this would probably improve with practice of running the programme, but still felt that some of the materials needed to be reduced. The possibility of not being able to cover all the materials in the two-hour session was an issue that was not addressed in the original training for the programme. As a result, the groups have been dealing with the problems caused by running out of time in their own ways. Some groups resumed the sessions they were unable to finish at the next meeting, thus adding extra time at the end of the programme (one group lagged two and a half weeks), some groups dropped part of the session in order to get through what they saw as the key materials. All ran over the time they had set aside for the sessions. This is an issue which could threaten the treatment integrity and quality of delivery required for accreditation.

More specific feedback included the need to identify the core aspects of each session. This included the aspects that must be covered, as well as those that could be left out should the tutors run out of time. There was also a feeling that some worksheets were repetitive and could be left out.

Recommendation 1: The amount of materials covered in each session needs to be reviewed, and guidelines need to be issued about managing the material within the two hours set aside or overrunning.

The Group of Five and the Guide (Appendix 3)

Offenders were asked how useful they found the Group of Five and the Guide, and how easily they identified with them. Overall, the offenders were divided on how similar the Group of Five and subsequently the Guide was to them, although most felt that the Group of Five was helpful.

Overall the feeling was that no one had used the Group of Five as intended by the programme designers. One issue was around the fact that they only had three of the five profiles, and thus in actual fact were working with a Group of three. Most tutors thought the Group of Five was a good idea and a useful concept, but one that has to be given some attention before the programme is rolled out further. As well as the missing materials, there were some issues about the women not being able to relate to the Group of Five, feeling that the Group of Five all had far more extreme backgrounds and had committed different (more serious) offences from them. Some tutors suggested that using more familiar profiles from the UK, would help.

The Guides were used little or not at all, for much the same reasons as the Group of Five. Most tutors were positive towards the concept, but felt that the Guides had to be changed to more familiar profiles in the same way as the Group of Five. There was also a feeling that the first session was too early to ask the offenders to choose their Guide, especially given that the offenders there had very different levels of motivation, and had not necessarily received any motivational work preparing them for the programme. There was some confusion about what to do if the offenders could not or did not pick a Guide from the Group of Five, and as a result some groups used them as examples only, and some dropped them altogether. Inconsistent use could have implications for treatment integrity.

Recommendation 2: All areas running the programme need to be issued with a complete and up-to-date set of programme materials before running the programme, and the instructions on how to use the materials need to be reviewed. The Group of Five and the Guide need to be reviewed.

The reflection sheets (Appendix 2)

There was again some ambiguity in how the reflection sheets were to be used. Most groups completed the reflection sheets at the end of each session, as the women either would not complete them if they had to take them home, or could not due to other factors (such as partners who were opposed to them doing the programme in the first place). Of the groups who did take the reflection sheets home, the tutors were unsure about how to check whether they had completed them, and what to do if they had not. A problem about completing them at the end of the sessions was to do with the amount of time they had to reflect on what they had learned, as well as the implications for timing. Despite these concerns, the overall feeling was that the reflection sheets were useful.

Overall, the offenders thought the reflection sheets were 'fairly useful' or 'very useful'. Of those expressing doubts about the reflection sheets, most thought they were too long, or that there were too many of them, and expressed a preference for them to be done verbally rather than as written exercises.

The thought cards (Appendix 1)

Most tutors said that the offenders were very positive towards the thought cards, and liked them. However, again there was a lack of clear guidelines on how they were to be used, and as a result some groups handed them out at random at the end of the session, and some identified cards relevant to the session and gave them out. The tutors said that use of the cards was clarified at the refresher training.

There was more ambivalence about the usefulness of the thought cards amongst the offenders, as several offenders answered that they were 'not very' or 'not at all' useful, and a similar number thought that they were useful.

The folders

The original idea was that the offenders should be given a box with drawers to keep the worksheets, reflection sheets, and the other programme materials in. As the programme managers were unable to identify a suitable box for this purpose, some smart wallets were bought for the offenders to keep their paperwork in.

The wallets initially provided for the women were replaced by ring-binders as these proved more practical. Those who introduced the ring-binders in the course of the programme said that the offenders were still proud of their ring-binders and the materials they had in them.

There are a number of issues that need to be addressed:

- Several tutors from different areas said they felt that some of the worksheets were repetitive, and that there were too many of them, especially given that they felt there was already too much material to be covered in each session.
- Missing materials, as for the Group of Five, made it more difficult to run the programme.
- Directions on the use of various materials need to be clarified.
- There is a problem in most aspects of the programme with Americanisms and jargon, and the tutors sometimes felt that they had to act as translators, or rewrite the worksheets to make them more appropriate for use with British women.
- The tutors were unclear about the extent to which they were supposed to read the sessions word for word from the manuals, or whether they could improvise. One problem they encountered was that the groups became very social, and the offenders wanted to discuss the issues raised by the session amongst themselves. The tutors encountering this were hesitant to cut them off and move on regardless.

Recommendation 3: The programme materials need to be reviewed to ensure that the language and contents suit groups of offenders in the UK correctional services.

Findings: The structure and assumptions of the programme

The tutors interviewed were very positive about the structure and sequencing of the programme, and felt that the different sections and phases followed each other well, and that each session continued and built on what was covered in the previous session.

Whilst some tutors agreed with the assumption that the offenders would be in the pre-contemplative stage on the Stages of Change model¹, others were less certain. Some thought that the lack of pre-programme motivational work may have contributed to some offenders dropping out, especially with the inclusion of the Group of Five and the Guide in the very first session. Some of the feedback about the Group of Five suggested that the offenders could not relate to them, and that they felt that the case histories of the Group of Five were too extreme. The concern was around whether it was realistic to expect offenders who had received no motivational work to arrive at session one and take full part in the programme from the outset. One suggestion made was that a pre-programme session in which the tutors introduce themselves and explain what the programme is about would be beneficial, as was done by one of the groups on their own initiative. The tutors also felt that informing case managers about the programme was needed, so that they in turn could give the offenders more information about the programme.

Recommendation 4: If there is not going to be a formal pre-programme package, the offenders need to receive sufficient information about the programme, either from case managers, programme tutors, or court staff, so that they know what to expect when attending session one.

All groups ran two sessions per week, and the tutors largely felt that it would not be feasible to run any more or any less, the former due to childcare and other commitments, and the latter due to the length of the programme (31 sessions).

Findings: Training and support

The feedback on the training was very consistent across the three areas, and the training the tutors did receive was rated very highly in terms of the enthusiasm of the trainers and the information given about the programme. The tutors thought the training was too short and thus too rushed, and lacked practical details on the running of sessions. Specific suggestions for aspects that could have been included were some role-playing of sessions and the inclusion of some Motivational Interviewing. A few tutors said the training had given them a very good overview of the programme in terms of the theory and contents, but lacked information on actually delivering sessions.

1. The Stages of Change model sets out five stages through which progress is made towards changing behaviour, originating from the field of psychotherapy. These stages are Pre-Contemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, and Maintenance. It is the tutors' role to help the offenders progress from a pre-contemplative state to having changed the relevant behaviours and maintaining the change. (Prochaska and DiClemente, 1982)

All who attended the one-week refresher training in January 2003 said that it had been very helpful, and had given the tutors the opportunity to clarify grey areas around the use of materials and the delivery of sessions.

Another issue raised was the gap between the tutors being trained and the commencement of the first groups. This gap was up to eight months. When the next groups of tutors are trained, this gap is likely to be reduced simply by virtue of the programme already running in some areas, although care should be taken to minimise the gap between the training and the roll-out of the programme.

The issue of training is recurring throughout the feedback on other aspects of the programme, and the lack of detailed practical guidance has led to some confusion and inconsistencies in the use of specific programme components.

Recommendation 5: Tutors thought the training needed to be longer and needs to include practice in running sessions.

None of the tutors felt well-supported in running the Real Women Programme. One particular issue of concern to the tutors was the feeling that the treatment and programme managers did not know the programme, and so were unable to offer any real support. The need for support was stressed by several tutors due to the emotive contents of the programme, and the extent to which the programme helped the participants discuss aspects of their lives which may also have affected tutors, including topics such as emotional dependence and domestic violence. The main source of support for all the tutors was their co-tutors. A substantial number of the tutors also said that they had received no supervision in the course of the programme. This may be a matter of wider staffing issues.

Another source of support that was missed was from case managers, who did not know enough about the programme. One tutor mentioned that she only spoke to case managers when there was a serious problem. The possibility of having the case manager sit in on a session, or three-way sessions as used in Think First, was suggested. Furthermore, the need to give case managers more information about the programme was seen to be crucial.

Recommendation 6: Other staff, such as programme managers and case managers, need to be informed of the contents and structure of the Real Women Programme so they can offer support to those working on the programmes. This could be disseminated through briefings or through information packs.

Findings: Other issues

Some of the other issues that were identified as potential areas of concern and interest were to do with problems faced by the women, preventing them from attending, and the women's thoughts on the location of the programme.

South Wales Probation Area put considerable resources into running the programme away from the probation office and the effects of running off-site, on the offenders' experiences, were examined. In South Wales Probation Area, all the offenders except one expressed a preference for being off-site as this felt more relaxed and less stigmatising. The tutors in South Wales also expressed a preference for the off-site location at the end of the programme, after initial frustrations with having to spend time and effort carrying and setting up equipment for every group. At the end of the programme they felt the impact on the offenders of being off-site was so positive that this outweighed the negatives.

However, of the offenders in Hertfordshire and West Midlands only a small minority thought that being off-site would be preferable to being at the probation office. The reasons they gave were mainly familiarity with the setting and sense of security at the probation office. The tutors in these areas also expressed a preference for the probation setting, seeing no disadvantage to the offenders of being in a probation office. The reasons they gave included the proximity to other staff (e.g. case managers when needed), and easy access to equipment. Some tutors expressed interest in running off-site based on the experiences of staff in South Wales.

Recommendation 7: The option of running groups off-site should be left open to individual areas.

4. Discussion

The tutors and offenders both reported generally positive experiences of the programme, and its relevance to their lives. This may reflect a greater focus on interpersonal criminogenic needs, as set out by Dowden and Andrews (1999), than in general offending behaviour programmes. The Real Women Programme does address personal criminogenic needs such as anti-social thinking, lack of problem-solving skills, and skill deficits, as generally addressed by general offending behaviour programmes, but not as strongly. There is without doubt a need for further work to establish the effectiveness of the programme in reducing reoffending and criminogenic needs. This is given added prominence as the offenders reported in their feedback that although they did not feel the programme particularly related to their offence, it was relevant to them personally.

One of the main features of the data presented above is that it was collected predominantly from completers. This clearly restricts our ability to comment on specific factors involved in and relevant to programme attrition, but still provides us with a valuable insight into the offenders' experience of the programme.

Overall, the feedback received from tutors and offenders about the programme was positive, especially as regards the perceived impact of the programme.

The offenders enjoyed the programme, enjoyed the group atmosphere as well as the contents, even if they felt that the programme was more relevant to their personal circumstances than specifically to their offence. In order to be able to say whether the impact of the programme in terms of the offenders' personal lives and on aspects such

as employment and problem-solving skills has an impact on reoffending and reconvictions, a wider study would have to be conducted. The possibility of further research and evaluation being conducted is currently being reviewed.

However, following on from the tutor interviews, there were a number of areas that need to be addressed before the programme is rolled out nationally, some of which are likely to have an impact on the offenders' experience of the programme and treatment integrity. These areas include training, the pre-programme work, the amount of materials, clarity of guidelines on how to use materials, adaptations for a British audience, and the need for raised awareness of the programme amongst non-programme stakeholders. For accreditation purposes most of the issues raised in the research have been addressed

As the programme structures are tightened and the materials and timings are clarified and completed, it will be essential to carry out a larger impact analysis and evaluation, including issues around programme integrity and cost-effectiveness. The Probation Service might consider evaluating this programme through the use of a random allocation design, allowing the outcomes for Real Women participants to be compared to outcomes for women that participate in the alternatives. It should be noted however that randomised controlled trials have been resisted in the criminal justice sector in the UK on the basis of equality and human rights issues (i.e. is it acceptable to offer some offenders potentially less effective interventions). These would need to be taken into account when designing a large-scale evaluation.

5. Conclusion

In terms of the implementation and roll-out of the programme, seven recommendations were made on aspects that need attention before the programme is rolled out more widely. These recommendations reflect the contents of this report, and are listed below.

Recommendation 1: *The amount of materials covered in each session needed to be reviewed, and guidelines issued about managing the material within the two hours set aside or overrunning.*

Recommendation 2: *All areas running the programme needed to be issued with a complete and up-to-date set of programme materials before running the programme, and the instructions on how to use the materials needed to be reviewed.*

Recommendation 3: *The programme materials needed to be reviewed to ensure that the language and contents suited British groups of offenders.*

Recommendation 4: *If there was not going to be a formal pre-programme package, the offenders needed to receive sufficient information about the programme, either from case managers, programme tutors, or court staff, so that they knew what to expect when attending session one. This appeared to be especially important given the assumption of the offenders being pre-contemplative.*

Recommendation 5: *The training for programme tutors needed to be longer than the one week initially given, and needed to include practice in running sessions of the programme.*

Recommendation 6: *Other staff, such as programme managers and case managers, need to be informed of the contents and structure of the Real Women Programme so they can offer support to those working on the programmes. This could be disseminated through briefings or through information packs.*

Recommendation 7: *The option of running groups off-site should be left open to individual areas.*

Appendices

Attached are some examples of the programme materials discussed in the report, including one profile from the Group of Five, some examples of thought cards, and the reflection sheet from session 4.

[Appendix 1:](#)

[Thought cards](#)

[Appendix 2:](#)

[Reflection sheet](#)

[Appendix 3:](#)

[Profile from the Group of Five](#)

Appendix 1

Thought cards

These are four examples of the thought cards used in the Real Women Programme, each of which has a front and a back.

Front

Back

Success is liking yourself, liking what you do, and liking how you do it.

Maya Angelou

What do you like about yourself?

The point of power is always in the present moment

Louise L Haye

The past is over and done it has no power over me ... I can begin to be free at this moment. Today's thoughts create my future. I am in charge.

If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you always got.

Unknown

Do something different today.

I say "Out" to every negative thought that comes to my mind. No person, place or thing has any power over me, for I am the only thinker in my mind. I create my own reality and everyone in it.

I let go of all expectations.

Appendix 2

Reflection sheet

This is the reflection sheet from session 4.

A WOMEN'S PROGRAMME

Meeting #4: ___/___/___
D/ M/ Y



Personal Reflections:
Something to Think About ...
What Gets Me "Stuck": My
Personal "Attitude" blocks



Failure Trap Strategy:

Not Seeing Alternatives:

Uncertainty ... Unclear Wants:

Yes, BUT:

Not Disappointed If you Don't Expect It:

All or Nothing:

Myth of Self-Reliance:

Appendix 3

Group of Five

This is the profile of Beth, one of the Group of Five as provided by the programme developers.

Motive:

Material gain (altruistic – different moral code –#i.e., provides goods to children, need money).

Biography

- Beth is 35 years of age
- First conviction age 14. This was for shoplifting; she was caught stealing food from a local supermarket.
- Beth has a long list of previous convictions mainly involving fraud/ using stolen cheque books. She has a total of 9 previous convictions;
 - Shoplifting age 14 – police caution
 - Shoplifting x 2 age 16 – attendance centre
 - Fraud (attempting to buy goods with stolen cheques) age 20 Probation order
 - Fraud x 3 age 22 – as above – 3 months in custody
 - Shoplifting age 28 – fine
 - Shoplifting age 32 – 40 hours Community Service
 - Fraud age 35
- Her first conviction was for shoplifting when she was aged 14. She was caught stealing food from a local supermarket. At that time she was living in the care of the local authority but had run away from the children's home.
- She was in care for disruptive behaviour; she experienced violence from a stepfather from a young age. He eventually left the family home when she was 11 but her behaviour just became worse.
- Beth dropped out of school at the age of 15 when she became pregnant with her first child.
- She said she found school boring and that most of her friends felt the same – so they used to play truant most of the time and go in to town shoplifting.
- She has relied on benefits throughout her adult life.
- She has had a sporadic work history. Her first job was in a chocolate factory where she worked for almost 10 months. She left this job when she married for the first time. She has also worked as a cleaner on three occasions for limited periods of time. She indicated that she enjoyed working and that she had good reports but left each job when she became involved in a serious relationship.
- She describes a history of financial instability and always felt as if she was barely making ends meet.
- Beth has five children ranging in age from 4 years to 19 years: Matt - 4 years, Sarah - 7, Michael - 14, James - 16, Carol – 19. Two grandchildren.
- Married and divorced twice. Each child has a different father. Sarah is the only child to have regular contact with her father. He is also the only one who contributes child support though this is minimal and sporadic.
- She describes most of her relationships as unhealthy (i.e., most of her partners did not contribute financially, several had serious addiction problems and two were involved with the criminal justice system).

- Whilst in prison she became friends with another woman who gave her some heroin. She found that she liked that and when she came out she continued to use and this resulted in her nearly losing her children to the care of Social Services. She found that she had to give up her best friend (the heroin) and successfully completed a detox programme. She has not used drugs for 9 months now.
- Beth has never been diagnosed with mental health difficulties though she describes long periods of depression where she felt immobilized and unable to take care of the children and her home.
- She has few social supports but can rely on her sister to assist with child-care.
- After prison, she had a new boyfriend but he has turned out as bad as the last one, only violent, he has broken her nose twice. Mostly she feels unable to keep money from him. She did decide to leave him once and went to a refuge but after 3 months she went back to him.

Offense analysis:

- Beth can trace each offense to feelings of depression. She acknowledges that for each offense there was a long period of time where she felt hopeless and embittered about her financial situation.
- On the first occasion she became preoccupied with buying her eldest child a new bed. She also wanted new trainers for the children and some clothes. Each subsequent charge is related to purchasing items for her children and for the home.

Success:

- Beth holds a full-time job with a local hotel. She puts a small amount of money away weekly to buy special things for the kids.

Beth's Vision of Success

She holds a full time job with a hotel and is putting away money each week to buy special things for her kids. There is also:

- Liking being on her own ... not feeling she "needs" a man.
- Feeling good and looking forward to getting up each day.
- Being able to "ask for help" and taking it when it is offered.

Authors

The study was conducted and written by Jorgen Lovbakke and Amy Homes from the Offenders and Criminal Justice: What Works unit in the Research, Development & Statistics Directorate.

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