

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Female Offenders' Multiple Goals for Engaging in Desired Communication with Their Probation/Parole Officers

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Summary/Conclusions

The current study examined communication between females on community supervision and their supervising officers. Interviews were conducted with 127 women specifically about difficult conversations with their supervising officers. The study discovered that 68% of women talked about the difficult issue while 33% did not. The most common issue to discuss was concerned a third party (20%) closely followed by housing issues (18%). Concern about losing freedom was the only significant factor that predicted whether or not the women would discuss issues or needs with her supervising officer.

Limitations of Information

The study population was solely women on community supervision in Michigan. The sample size (n=127) was small. The study examined the multiple goals theory of communication to determine whether women communicate. It may not include other factors that also influence whether or not women decide to communicate. Interviews, may not provide individuals with enough time to process questions before answering.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Consequences Determine Disclosures

One challenge that probation and parole officers face is eliciting information about needs and difficult issues from individuals. People on supervision may not want to provide that information due to a myriad of different reasons such as pride, culture, perceived support, cognitive distortion, or dishonesty. The present research article utilizes data to examine whether female offenders talk about difficult issues and current needs, why the women decided to discuss difficult topics, and prevalence of topic themes.

Female offenders were asked if they ever experienced a difficult situation or need that they wished to talk about with their supervising officer. If they indicated agreement, they were asked if the conversation happened. Individuals who had the conversation were asked to elaborate. If an individual did not have the conversation, she was asked why it didn't happen. Individuals were also asked a series of survey questions to determine what may have influenced their communication decisions.

From a sample of 402 women, 127 (32%) reported a time when they wanted to have a difficult discussion with their supervising officer. Of that group, 84 (68%) had a conversation, while 41 (33%) did not. The only statically significant influence that determined whether or not women engaged in conversations were concern about personal freedom. The more concern, the less likely the conversation would take place. The

most common difficult conversation topic was concerned third parties followed by housing topics. Noteworthy were individual's reasons for having or not having conversations. Support (37.4%), emotional expression (14.5%), and to inform their supervising officer (13.3%) were all factors of why individuals decided to have a conversation. Reasons individuals avoided difficult conversations were communication issues (25%), negative relationship (17.5%), and lack of ability for officers to help if they wanted to (10%).

Practical Applications

- ✓ Establish rapport with probationers early on during supervision. This may make difficult topics easier to discuss.
- ✓ Pay attention to non-verbal expressions and give others your full focus and attention when having conversations.
- ✓ Express curiosity.
- ✓ Use the "spirit" of Motivational Interviewing to help individuals feel heard and understood.
- ✓ Once trained, use SBC to respond to violation behaviors to ensure probationers know the response is proportionate, consistent, and neutral. These principles may offset concerns about loss of personal freedom.
- ✓ Let probationers know you want them to be successful on probation. Ask probationers how you can help them meet their goals and overcome barriers.

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