

# Women's Desistance: What Matters to Young Women in Quebec?

Jessica Cleary,  
PhD Student

University of Stirling

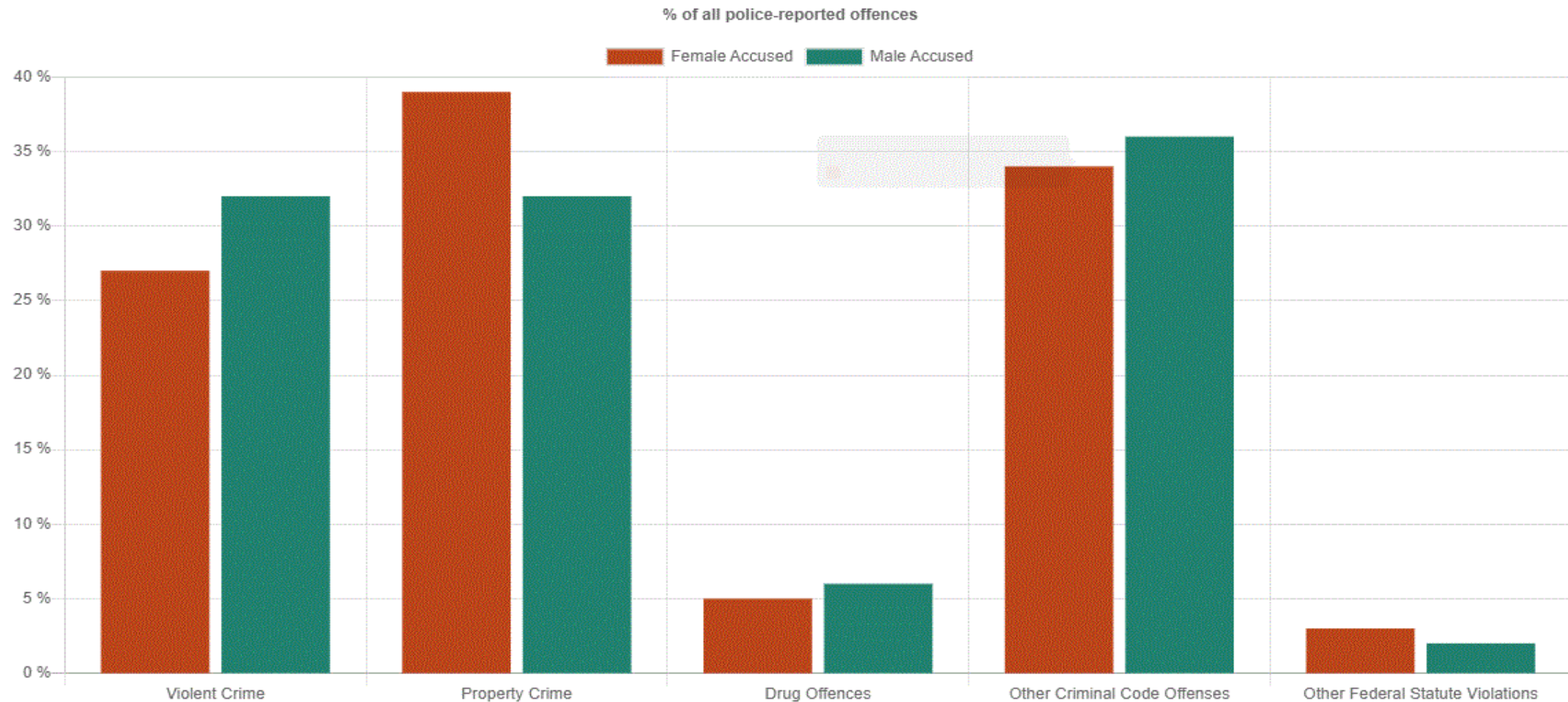
Isabelle F.-Dufour,  
PhD

Université Laval



# The State of Female Incarceration in Canada

Chart 6. Police-reported offences, by gender of accused and category of offence (as a percentage of all police-reported offences for each gender), 2019.



# Women in conflict with the law



1

## Gender Matters in Correctional Programming

Seemingly 'gender-neutral' CJ approaches are informed by' CJ research **with men** - Yet what works for men has been found to **not** work best for women

2

## CJ Approaches Must Consider the Impact of Trauma When Supporting Criminalized Women

Interventions for women should be 'trauma-responsive' & the workforce trained in 'trauma-informed practices' (Covington, 2022)

3

## Interventions Need to Account for the impact of Gendered Marginalization on Women's Pathways In & Out of Crime

CJ programs for women must accommodate for the structural disadvantage women face in society & the gendered barriers to fair pay, employment, healthcare & safe housing

# Women's Desistance

The invisibility of women's gender-specific differences within the 'male-stream' literature



## Experiences of Repeat Victimization

McIvor et al., 2004; Covington and Bloom, 2007



## Relationships as the Harmful Context

Leverentz, 2006; Rutter & Barr, 2021; Petrilo, 2022



## Intersectional Marginalization Impacts Agency

Giordano et al. 2002; Österman, 2018; Rodermond et al., 2016



## Patriarchal Limits on Positive New Identities

Stone et al., 2016; Leverentz, 2014; McCorkel, 2013



# What Else is there to Learn?

**RQ1** - What are the key themes, circumstances and challenges in the lives of young women criminalized within Quebec's justice system?

**RQ2** - What are the key factors which impact young women's processes of desistance in Quebec?

# Methodology

Data was a sampled sub-set of the longitudinal partnership project, **(RE)SO 16-35**, which interviewed **144 people** criminalized in 2019 from 3 cities in the province of Quebec

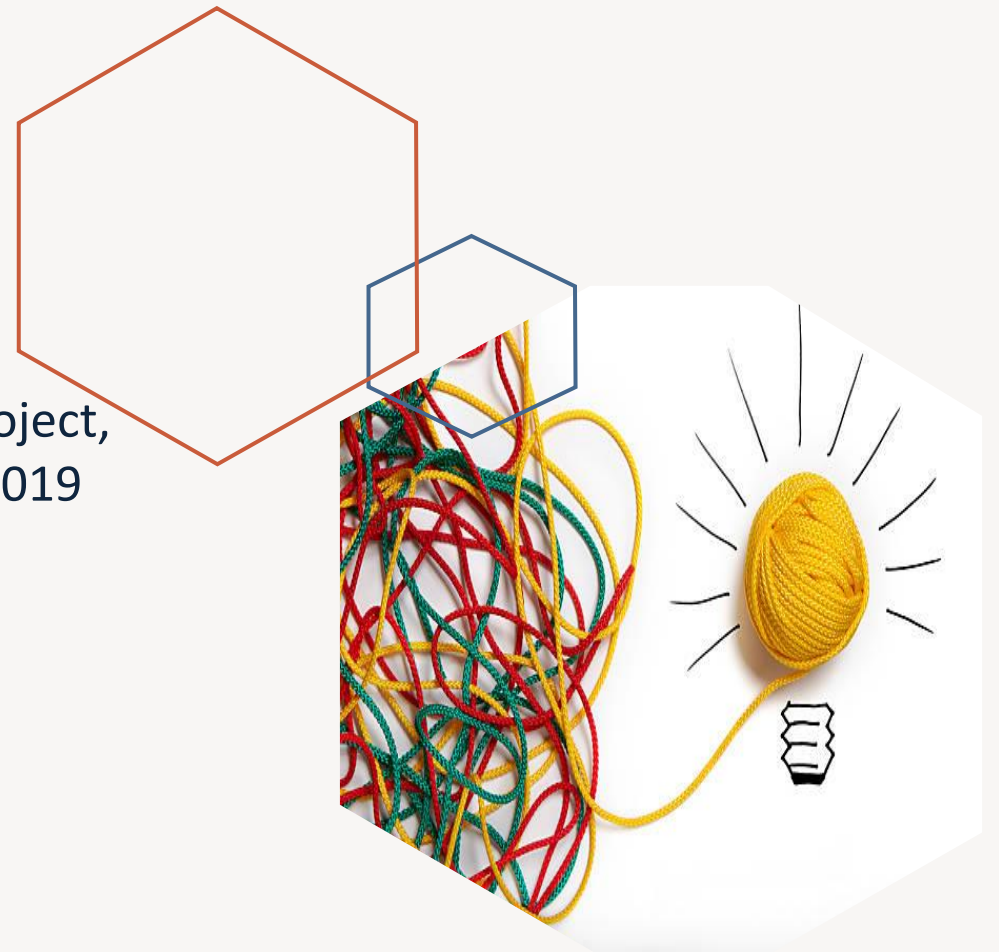
Gender Breakdown of 144 sample = 117 men and **27 women**

Of these 27 women **15** were reinterviewed 20 months later

## Exclusion Criteria

- Women who only did interview 1
- Girls under 18 = 7/15
- Aboriginal Adult Women = 1/15

= **7 women > 14 interview transcripts**





# Findings: 5 Cross-Cutting Themes



# Relationships



## Romantic Partners

**Main type of relationship found to have a perceived causal influence women's desistance**

Negative influence on women:

- Role in their arrest(s)
- Encouraged use of drugs & alcohol
- Experiences of control & abuse

Positive influence on women:

- New relationships = most valued support
- Increased their self esteem & belief in themselves
- Shared focus on not reoffending (& sobriety)



## Family

**Main sources of support for (most) women during and after sentence(s)**

Families' recognition of the women's progress impacted:

- their levels of shame associated with their past
- feelings of self-worth
- how close they became with their family
- to not use drugs and/ or alcohol

But childhood adversity & family adversity was dominant in all 7 women's narratives



## Friends

**Most difficult type of relationships for women to maintain & find post release**

Women lost contact with important friends when they began using drug & being arrested

Replaced by new friendships with others with addictions or convictions

Moving on required new friendships with people who shared their values & priorities BUT this was difficult to identify & sustain = pain of desistance



## **Multiple Arrests & Short-Term Sentences**

**6 out of the 7 women (aged 18-25) had between 6-52 arrests at time of second interviews**

Compounded effects of multiple arrests stops women's abilities to move beyond the "offender" or "problem" identity in 2 main ways:

1. Feeling of inescapable surveillance & judgement from justice services and workers
2. Ineffectiveness of desistance-orientated programs due to short term nature of their sentences



# Prioritizing Addiction

All 7 women had experience of drinking alcohol and using illegal drugs (and/ or prescriptive drugs in ways not prescribed to them by health professionals). **BUT 4 of the 7 described their relationship with substances as “problematic” or an addiction**

For those 4 managing their addiction(s) was the central priority as:

- (re)offending behaviour was linked with if they were using or not
- they struggled to engage with justice programmes/ met bail conditions until they were able to stay off drugs and/ or alcohol
- positive personal relationships in their lives were only present when they were maintaining their sobriety
- Having their addictions under control was linked to their prioritisation of employment and ability to maintain jobs



### Those Who Had Employment

- Provided a sense of purpose & new focus
- Key to new non-offending identity & sense of self-worth
- Work colleagues & boss became new important relationships within their network of support
- Helped with their relationships with family to evidence progress

### Those That Didn't

- Harder to avoid (re)using drugs and/ or alcohol
- Poor self-esteem, feelings of shame & helplessness
- Belief desistance was impossible for them
- Difficult meeting bail conditions & financially support themselves through legal means

# Accommodation

**High frequency of housing moves were experienced by all 7 throughout their lives because of 3 key reasons:**

1. Instability in their lives due to relationships with parents and/or romantic partners
2. Poverty & the impact of their criminal record
3. Serving prison sentences in different parts of the country

**Stable Accommodation was found to influence:**

- Belief they can start again/ change
- Feeling safe
- Being able to focus on addiction recovery and desistance

At the point of follow up interview:

- 2 – subletting from friends or family
- 2 – still in social integration live in programs
- 1 – homeless
- 2 – in rented accommodation (1 with partner/1 independently)



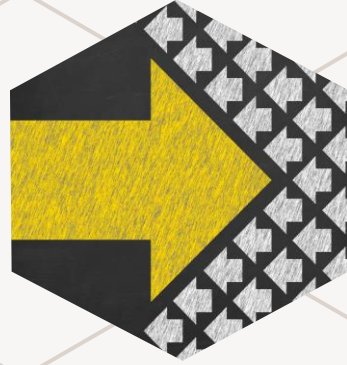
# Key Learning for Supporting Women's Desistance Processes

## Relationships



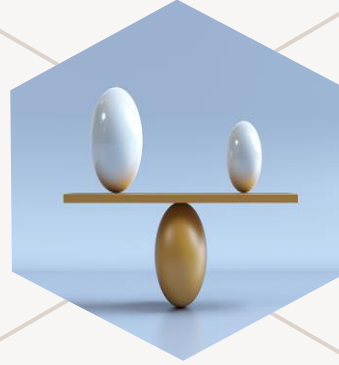
Services and workers need to centralize relationship-based practices for women. Recognizing & using the role relationships with partners, family members and friends have on women's ability to focus on desistance will make sentences & support more effective

## Multiple Arrests



Women's holistic needs & circumstances must be at the center of a more joint up approach to sentencing and support. Instead of police and the courts responding to individual cases of arrests which can ignore the good work women have began doing whilst servicing other sentences

## Addiction



Addressing addiction & the underlying trauma which people self-medicate for must be primary focus for sentencers & services supporting women with addictions. Recognition of the adverse impact criminalization has on recovery from addiction is also needed

## Employment



The impact of criminal records needs to be addressed in policy & the law – & considered during sentencing. Development of employment skills – including the deeper work to tackle addiction & trauma – need to be prioritized.

## Accommodation



Supporting women's throughcare to secure long-term, affordable housing post-release must be a priority for all justice services. Availability of such housing needs to be structurally addressed if desistance & recovery is to be possible



## Working Reflections

These findings raise almost indistinguishable structural challenges to what is found in research with criminalised women in the UK:

- Scotland (Fotopoulou & Malloch, 2022)
- Wales (Gorden & Lockwood, 2022)
- England (Seaman & Lynch, 2022)

Despite different policies and practices for supporting women – **WHY?**

‘Wicked Social Problems’ such as gendered marginalisation & the relationship between intersectional socio-economic disadvantage & criminalisation transcend national context

Internationally approaches need to move beyond reformist “tinkering with the systems” to more effectively break cycles of reoffending by addressing the barriers found in the lives of women & prioritise what matters to them

# What does it all mean for strategic improvements & change in Quebec?

Quebec must learn from other nations approaches to gender-responsive approaches to justice

BUT changes to justice systems & practices does not address the harms caused **by** criminalisation. Addressing this issues requires:

- Abolitionist policy, sentencing legislation and diversion options
- Early intervention practices from other sectors of the system (health, social work, education) are needed



A decorative graphic on the left side of the slide consists of a cluster of hexagons in various colors (light blue, orange, grey, dark blue, and white). Some of these hexagons contain small, square images of people in professional settings: a man and a woman in a meeting, a woman presenting to a group, a group of people with hands raised, and a group of people clapping.

# Thank you for listening

For a reference list please  
email: [j.e.cleary1@stir.ac.uk](mailto:j.e.cleary1@stir.ac.uk)