



Ministry of
JUSTICE

Researching female offenders:

**The role of evidence in shaping
policy**

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Female Offenders in England and Wales: Background

Domestic violence

Twice as many female prisoners than males report an experience of some form of abuse during their lifetime.

Children & Caring Responsibilities

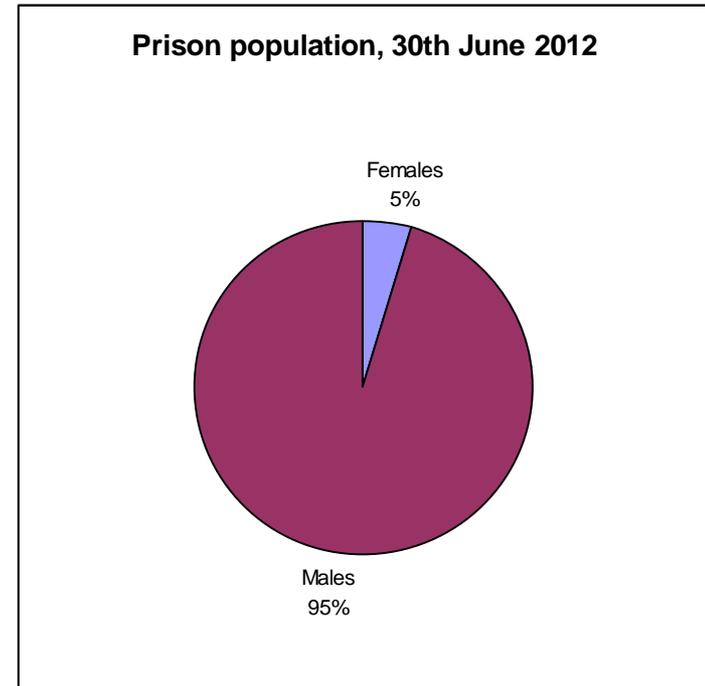
A higher proportion of women than men have dependent children under the age of 18 living with them when they enter custody (around 45% of male prisoners compared to around 60% of female prisoners).

Self harm

A higher proportion of female offenders self-harm compared to males. Female offenders that self-harm do so more often than males.

Key statistics: Female offenders in England and Wales

- In 2012, 75% of those sentenced in courts were male and 25% were female.
- Of those sentenced at all courts, a lower proportion of females (3%) than males (10%) were sentenced to immediate custody.
- At 30th June 2013 there were 79,989 males and 3,853 females in prison
- The average custodial sentence is shorter for female prisoners than males



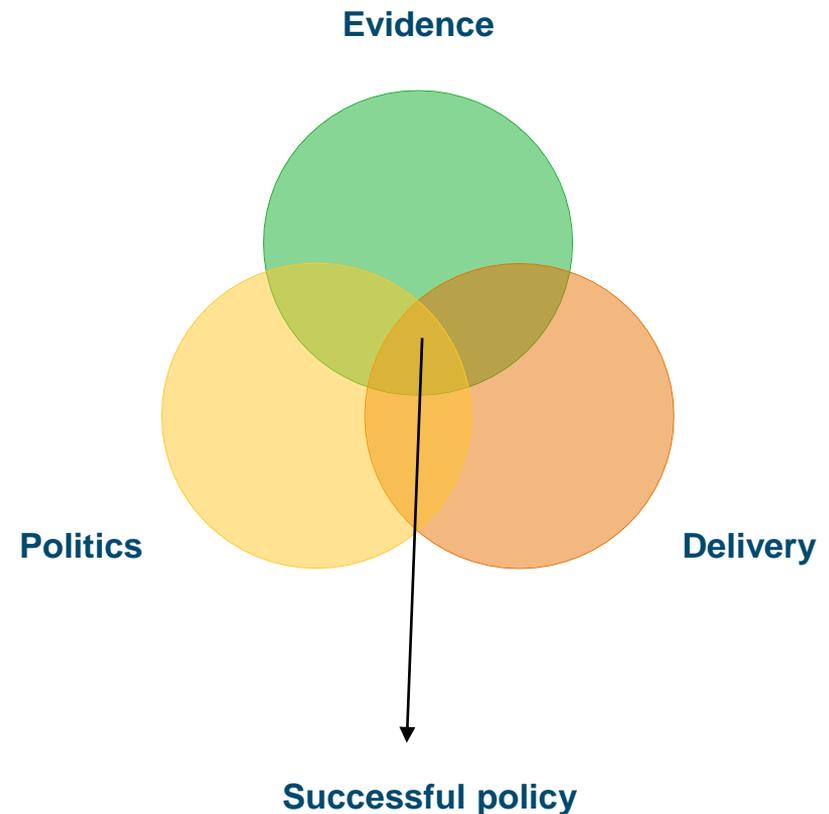
How is policy developed? The theory...

What is good policy work?

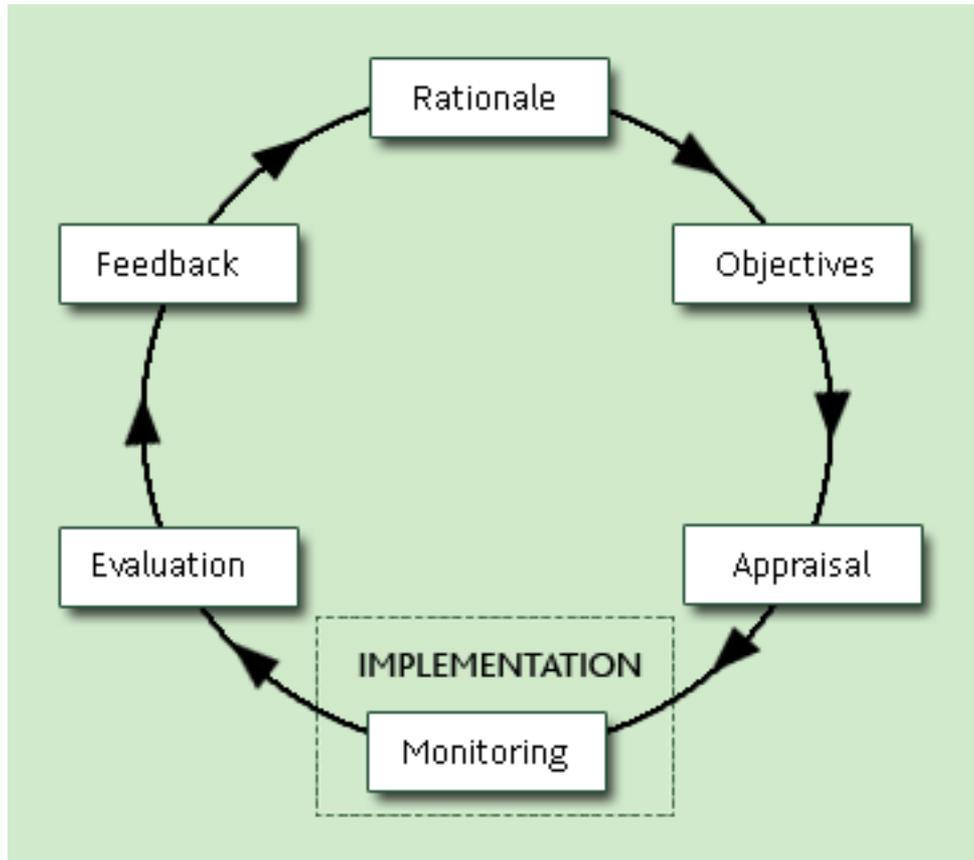
Successful policy depends on:

- 1) The development and use of a sound evidence base (including stakeholders views and responses to consultations)
- 2) Understanding and managing the political context (including Ministerial objectives and feedback from the public)
- 3) Planning from the outset for how the policy will be delivered (including good project management & monitoring of delivery)

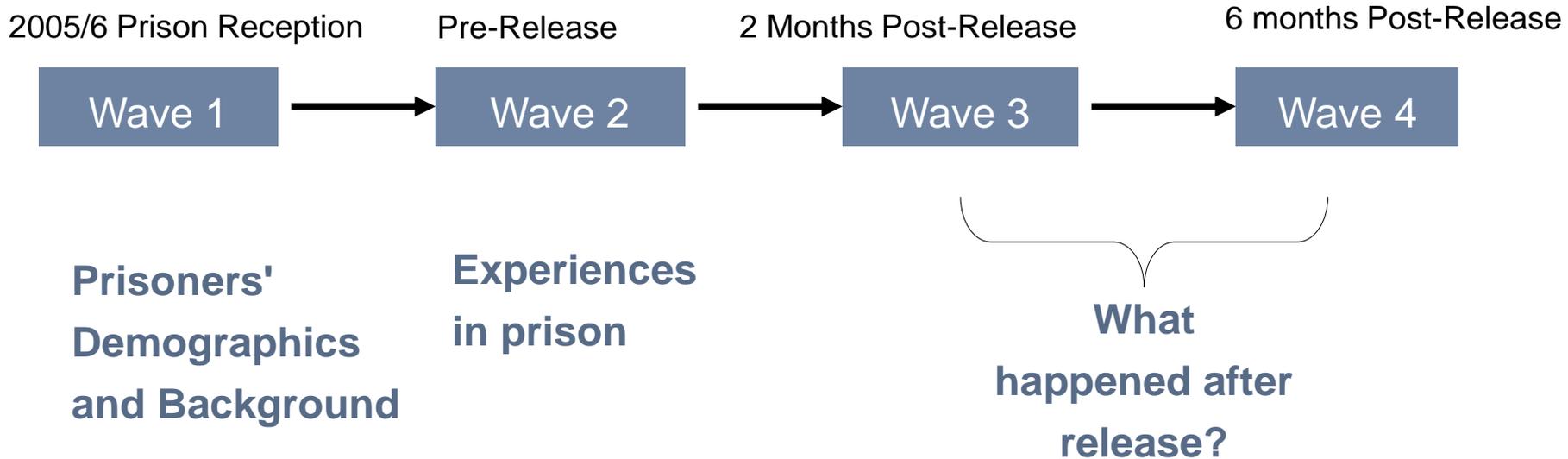
Source: Policy Profession: Skills and Knowledge Framework
www.civilservice.gov.uk



The ROAMEF Cycle...



SPCR is a longitudinal cohort study of prisoners



The Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction survey (SPCR)

What it is?

A longitudinal survey of 1,435 newly sentenced prisoners in England and Wales

How many people?

The sample consisted of 1,303 male and 132 female prisoners

What areas did it explore?

The research examined drug and alcohol use, rates of self-harm and attempted suicide, the presence of specific mental health disorders and links to reconviction.

Limitations?

The number of women was relatively small, reflecting the relative size of the female prison population. Consequently, results based on the women's sample may be too small to allow some smaller gender differences to be detected.

Key reports:

Gender differences in substance misuse and mental health among prisoners

Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds

Key findings: Similarities between male and female prisoners

(Gender Differences in Substance Abuse & Mental Health SPCR report)

- **There were no differences in the proportions of male and female SPCR prisoners who reported ever having used drugs, nor were there any gender differences detected in overall drug use in the four weeks before custody.**
- **Patterns of alcohol consumption did not differ substantially by gender. The rate of alcohol use overall amongst prisoners was slightly lower than in the general population, when comparing those who said they drank alcohol in the last year. Male and female prisoners both reported high levels of hazardous drinking.**
- **Both male and female prisoners suffering from depression were more likely to be reconvicted in the year after release from custody.**
- **Drug use was strongly associated with reconviction (this did not differ by gender). Alcohol use was also associated with reconviction upon release, to a lesser extent. (again, this did not differ by gender).**
- **Over half (52%) of the SPCR sample was reconvicted of at least one offence within 12 months of their release from custody, and there was no difference in reconviction rates amongst male and female prisoners.**

Key findings: Differences

- **Female prisoners reported more Class A drug use in the four weeks before custody than male prisoners, and were also more likely to report that their offending was to support someone else's (as well as their own) drug use.**
- **Female SPCR prisoners reported poorer mental health than both women in the general population and male SPCR prisoners.**
- **Binge drinking was associated with higher reconviction rates among female prisoners, but not amongst male prisoners.**
- **Male prisoners with symptoms of psychosis were more likely to be reconvicted in the year after custody.**

Influencing Policy...

- **The research has informed policy objectives for women offenders, and helped set the direction for the development of service provision.**
- **In March 2013, the strategic objectives for female offenders were published, emphasising that where differences exist between male and female offenders, the criminal justice system must be responsive. However, the aims of the criminal justice system apply to male and female offenders alike.**
- **Building relationships with policy colleagues throughout the research process was key to ensuring that the findings influenced the direction of policy. Balancing the need for the research to be robust whilst simultaneously being aware of the often fast-paced nature of policy.**
- **Key research findings and gaps in the evidence base are discussed at Advisory Board for Female Offenders meetings.**

Challenges...

- **The often emotive and sensitive nature of the topic was a key challenge both in the production of the research and in influencing policy.**
- **To overcome this, we proactively engaged with internal and external stakeholders at key points of the research process, to explain our research findings.**
- **Working with different Government Departments to ensure evidence informs the development of policy.**
- **Working in a busy policy environment.**
- **Developing effective communication strategies.**