



# Research at a glance

## Therapeutic Alliance and Offender-Staff Relations in Women's Corrections

**KEY WORDS:** *therapeutic alliance, women offenders, correctional interventions*

### What it means

The current study demonstrates that healthy working relationships between institutional parole officers (POs) and women offenders may contribute to the overall adjustment of women during their incarceration. Although the findings are preliminary in nature, the results emphasize the importance of positive staff-offender interactions, the practice of dynamic security, and the selection of correctional staff with qualities that foster positive alliances with offenders in promoting correctional objectives.

### What we found

Results of a correlation analysis demonstrated that women's perceived level of bonding with their PO was related to their institutional adjustment. Women with higher bond ratings were less likely to engage in institutional misconducts ( $r = -.22, p < .05$ ). Interview responses from both staff and offenders further supported the importance of maintaining relational health and positive alliances within the institutional setting. Women consistently highlighted the importance of communication, interpersonal and relational skills that facilitate positive alliances between staff and offenders. Staff demonstrated their knowledge of the construct of therapeutic alliance, its meaning, and its application to the job, while also acknowledging the challenges of establishing alliances with such a diverse population within an environment that requires a focus on both positive interactions and safety/security concerns.

The majority of staff and women indicated that dynamic security was being practiced across all of the women's sites. However, both groups also recognized certain operational demands and the provision of resources as obstacles in the maintenance of alliances.

### Why we did this study

The current study emerged in response to an increasing focus in correctional literature on the importance of therapeutic alliance. Therapeutic alliance has been conceptualized as the collaborative and affective rapport established between a

treatment provider and his/her client(s). The quality of this alliance is an important variable in the treatment process, affecting rehabilitation outcomes across diverse modes of treatment. Research in this area in correctional settings, particularly in settings with women offenders, is limited.

The purpose of the current study, therefore, was to investigate the extent to which relationships between women offenders and institutional staff in the federal correctional system are characterized by healthy connections while exploring the construct of the therapeutic alliance.

### What we did

Participants consisted of 124 women offenders and 88 correctional staff from all six women's federal facilities in Canada. Measures of alliance and relational health were used as predictors of institutional misconducts. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information regarding staff and offender perceptions of alliances overall within the facility as well as the impact of the operational environment (dynamic/static security) on the development of such alliances.

### For more information

Harris, A., Taylor, K., Brown, S., & Booth, L. (2014). *Therapeutic alliance and offender-staff relations in women's corrections* (Research Report R-305). Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

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