

## Violent Female Offenders: An Exploration of Adversity, Trauma, and Offending Behaviour in a Sample of Females Supervised by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland

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**Summary:** Research shows that trauma and adversity, as well as the subsequent development of maladaptive coping strategies, are said to increase significantly the propensity, frequency, and seriousness of violent offending (Mahoney and Karatzias, 2012). Exploring these variables can provide insight into the causes of crime and explain its perpetuation in society, which, in turn, can be used to inform crime-prevention initiatives and assist in the reduction of recidivism. While there has been an increased focus on the initiation and maintenance of risk-factors that perpetuate violent offending, comparisons between one-time violent offenders (OVO) and repeat violent offenders (RVO) have rarely been explored. Furthermore, much of the available literature details the experiences of male offenders. Despite the fact that women in the criminal justice system consistently report experiences of trauma and adversity in their lives, the relationship between those experiences and female violent offending has not been widely explored. This paper outlines and discusses the findings from the author's postgraduate research and draws from previous work comparing OVO and RVO profiles and experiences, in particular that of Mahoney and Karatzias (2012). The research explores the role of trauma and adverse life experiences in the onset and maintenance of violent offending by two groups of females: OVO (n=8) and RVO (n=8). Excerpts of qualitative data gathered from the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNi) was explored using a thematic analysis. Five major themes emerged, providing an overview of the social, personal, and offending domains of the participants. Both groups report extensive adverse experiences, with similarities and differences reported, as well as varying degrees of severity. This research highlights the behavioural heterogeneity of violent female offenders and provides a personal profile of one-time and repeat offenders.

**Keywords:** Female violent offending, one-time violent offenders (OVO), repeat violent offenders (RVO), recidivism, trauma, adverse experiences.

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## Introduction

'Violent offending' is a type of criminal behaviour that varies in severity from offences such as robbery to what are commonly thought of as more damaging offences, such as serious assault, manslaughter and homicide (Polaschek, 2018). This type of offending is understood to occur as a result of a complex interaction between situation and individual-based factors and social cognitive variables (Polaschek, 2018). As a result, research on violence has focused on the risk factors that may increase the likelihood that an individual will engage in criminal activity, and the variables that may perpetuate and maintain that violent behaviour (Weizmann-Henelius *et al.*, 2004).

A flexible framework for understanding causes of violent behaviour is the General Aggression Model (GAM) (Anderson and Bushman, 2002). This theory acknowledges the factors that may add to aggression, such as biological factors including impairment in executive cognitive functioning (Allen *et al.*, 2018), and environment-based factors like adversity and negative peer influence (Polaschek, 2018). Several authors have since applied the GAM to explain criminal violence (Polaschek, 2018). This model is useful when conceptualising the wide range of factors that can contribute to violent and aggressive behaviour as it focuses on both stable individual differences in aggression, including low self-control, and research on situational risk factors, such as substance abuse (Polaschek, 2018). These interacting individual and situational factors lead to engagement in aggressive or non-aggressive action (Polaschek, 2018).

## Violent female offenders

Of the risk factors associated with violent offending, adverse experiences have been thoroughly researched. These experiences include negative environmental factors, such as instability in employment and education, exposure to violence, substance misuse, untreated mental health difficulties, and interpersonal conflict (Bowles *et al.*, 2012; Hilton *et al.*, 2019). These high-stress environments can shape a person's view of themselves and the world around them, leading to cognitive distortions about acceptable social behaviours (Levenson *et al.*, 2015). Thus, individuals adopt high-risk behaviours as part of a continuum of maladaptive coping strategies (Levenson *et al.*, 2015), leading to psychosocial problems later in life (Felitti, 2002), including engagement in criminal behaviour (Toth and Cicchetti, 2013). It is with this in mind that researchers have sought to investigate the potential

role of adversity as a risk and maintaining factor of violent offending (Hilton *et al.*, 2019).

One population of individuals at risk of being exposed to repeated adversity is that of offenders (Bowen *et al.*, 2018). Adults with a history of criminal behaviour are more likely to come from low-income families (Miller and Barnes, 2013) and report experiencing domestic violence, substance misuse (O'Neill, 2017; Willis and Levenson, 2016), or trauma as a result of loss and abandonment (Courtney and Maschi, 2013), and consistently report more lifetime stress factors, including unemployment and financial instability, than a control group (Horwitz *et al.*, 2001).

Furthermore, some studies report adversity experienced more frequently by female offenders than males. In a study of 203 violent offenders, the females reported a higher level of stressful life events in childhood and reported experiencing sexual abuse ten times more often than men (Rossegger *et al.*, 2009). Similarly, Belknap and Holsinger (2006) report that female offenders had experienced higher instances of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse than their male counterparts. In this study, when asked if the participants believed that their history of maltreatment had contributed to their offending behaviour, over half of the sample indicated that it had (Belknap and Holsinger, 2006). An evaluation of the PBNi Inspire Model in 2011 found that female offenders in Northern Ireland faced a range of vulnerabilities in relation to their health and wellbeing, family relationships, children, and addictions, and a significant proportion had also experienced serious and sustained violence or sexual violence either as adults or as children. The research highlights the importance of the environmental and social context in determining how adverse experiences may fit within female pathways into crime and the role they may play in maintaining criminal behaviour (Bowles *et al.*, 2012).

While research exploring the link between violent offending and adversity has grown in recent years, it is still not clear how it relates to criminal propensity in OVO and RVO. Mahoney and Karatzias (2012) have suggested that both groups have differing behavioural profiles; thus both offenders may have different risk and maintaining factors, or varying degrees of severity in these factors, that increase the propensity for engaging in violent behaviour. Some studies have sought to explore the factors that may correlate with, or be predictive of, violent female offending through comparison of offending histories (Bell, 2004; Mahoney and Karatzias, 2012). Chambers (2010) suggests that the identification of these risk factors may improve

understanding of how certain developmental trajectories result in engagement in criminal pathways.

Different behavioural patterns were explored by Bell (2004), who reports that OVO were significantly more likely to have committed homicide. Yet interestingly, Weizmann-Henelius and colleagues (2004) report recidivists as having significantly higher levels of antisocial personality traits, substance misuse issues, and a history of non-violent criminality; they were also less likely to be emotionally close to their victims than the first-time offenders. While there were no significant differences between the groups in terms of psychiatric care, a significantly larger proportion of the RVO (80.6 per cent) had a diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder than the OVO (16.7 per cent) (Weizmann-Henelius *et al.*, 2004). Interestingly, the study reported no significant differences in stressful life events or experiences of childhood or adulthood victimisation (Weizmann-Henelius *et al.*, 2004).

Mahoney and Karatzias (2012) investigated the behavioural patterns, demographic history, and personality traits of 87 female violent offenders. The RVO reported greater instances of child-conduct problems and onset of offending at an earlier age than OVO (Mahoney and Karatzias, 2012). Furthermore, RVO were more likely to commit crimes against victims who were not known to them, a similar finding to the Weizmann-Henelius *et al.* (2004) study, which suggests a difficulty in formulating intimate and supportive relationships (Mahoney and Karatzias, 2012). Thus, existing research shows that these two categories of offenders present as distinct sub-groups, both in the type of violent offences they commit, and across a range of social and psychological factors (Mahoney and Karatzias, 2012).

## Methodology

Given the gap in specific research focusing on violent female offenders, the nature of the study is exploratory, in order to gain an insight into adverse experiences and explore these comparatively, based on offending histories. As this research focused on a female population sample, with specific offending behaviour, purposive sampling was employed. Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis was applied to the data to gain an understanding of the personal, offending, and social domains of each female offender.

Prior to commencement of the research, ethical approval was gained from Trinity College, Dublin, and the PBNI. Statisticians within the PBNI selected a

random sample on the Probation caseload, stratified by the gender and offence type requested by the author. For the purposes of this study, participants had to be female and had to have committed at least one violent offence; based on inclusion criteria, 16 violent female offenders were selected, all of whom had committed violent crimes. Qualitative information that had been analysed had come from reports produced by the PBNI.

### **Participants**

Within the participant sample, two naturally occurring groups were formed: eight OVO with no previous convictions, and eight RVO with more than one conviction for a violent crime. Table 1 illustrates the demographic and offending information of the OVO participants. First-time offences ranged from common assault and assault with actual bodily harm, to manslaughter and murder. All victims of the crimes were personally known to the offender, with the most commonly reported victim being an intimate partner. The most common age range reported at the time of conviction for this group was 40–49.

The offence history of the RVO group is more extensive, illustrated by Table 2. The repeat offenders had varying types of violent crimes committed, including assault, manslaughter, grievous bodily harm, criminal damage, drug-related offences, assault on police, breach of bail, fraud, driving offences, and arson. The most common age range reported at the time of the current conviction was 30–39.

**Table 1:** *Demographic and offending information of OVO participants*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Order type</i>	<i>Order duration</i>	<i>Age at conviction</i>	<i>Offence description</i>
OVO 1	Probation order	3 years	30–39	Assault — actual bodily harm (AOABH)
OVO 2	Enhanced combination order	2 years	20–29	Common assault
OVO 3	Life sentence/licence	15 years	30–39	Murder

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Order type</i>	<i>Order duration</i>	<i>Age at conviction</i>	<i>Offence description</i>
OVO 4	Indeterminate custodial sentence	99 years	40–49	Manslaughter
OVO 5	Probation order	12 months	40–49	AOABH
OVO 6	Probation order	12 months	20–29	Assault
OVO 7	Determinate custodial sentence	27 months	40–49	Wounding with intent
OVO 8	Life sentence/ licence	10 years	50–59	Murder

**Table 2:** *Demographic and offending information of RVO participants*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age at current conviction</i>	<i>Current offence</i>	<i>Past offence details</i>
RVO 1	18–19	AOABH	30 previous convictions, incl. assault on police, common assault, and serious assault
RVO 2	30–39	Manslaughter	96 previous convictions, incl. serious assault
RVO 3	50–59	Grievous bodily harm with intent, and serious assault	200 previous convictions, incl. threats to kill, assault on police
RVO 4	30–39	Criminal damage, theft, assault	39 previous convictions, incl. assault
RVO 5	30–39	Arson, assault on police	Incl. assault on police, common assault, criminal damage
RVO 6	20–29	Criminal damage	34 previous convictions, incl. assault on police

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age at current conviction</i>	<i>Current offence</i>	<i>Past offence details</i>
RVO 7	40–49	Wounding with intent	Incl. child cruelty, intimidation
RVO 8	20–29	Breach of an order	Incl. assault on police, common assault, serious assault

### ***Procedure***

Qualitative information was gathered from the Assessment Case Management and Evaluation Systems report produced by PBNI, and it was transcribed by the statistics unit. This is an assessment of general reoffending for all service-users under statutory supervision with PBNI. It contains three sections that pertain to the Social (Section A), Personal (Section B), and Offending (Section C) domain of all participants (PBNI, 2011). Section A focuses on the offender's current social circumstances, providing information on accommodation, community, employment, education and training, finances, and family and personal relationships. Section B provides information regarding the personalised factors that may exist as problems for the offender, and which may have contributed to their offending behaviour. This includes information on substance misuse and addiction, health, personal skills, and individual characteristics. Section C focuses on the lifestyle and associates of the offender, their attitude, motivation, and any risk of serious harm.

### **Key findings and discussion**

The dataset was thematically analysed, and five major themes were identified, all of which pertain to the social, personal, and offending domains of the participants. Environmental Factors, Support, Individual Characteristics, Substance Misuse, and Violence and Trauma all provide insights into the adversity experienced by the OVO and RVO, within the individual themes.

#### ***Environmental factors***

'Environmental factors' relates to the situational context that may influence the offending behaviour of the participant. This includes references to education, employment, and the living situation of the participants. There is

only one reference made to education in the OVO group: OVO 3 has been described as 'capable' and is currently 'pursuing an honours degree' whilst she is in custody. It is also mentioned that she had received a positive reference from her school principal, which was presented at her appeal hearing as a testament to her character.

The education experiences recalled by the RVO are significantly more negative. Reports were made of either not finishing and/or moving school due to abusive and aggressive behaviour. For example, RVO 1 is reported to have been expelled from school at the age of 14, This is similarly reported with RVO 2, who is reported as having to complete:

her education at an alternative setting due to violent behaviour and substance misuse during her school days. (RVO 2).

It would appear that the repeat offenders demonstrate earlier conduct problems than the OVO, indicated by their aggressive behaviour in a school context. Andrews and Bonta (2003) identify problematic circumstances at school as a risk factor for criminal behaviour, and one of the best predictors of recidivism, as it has significantly lasting effects on the individual, including reducing access to adequate services, as well as having social implications.

Unemployment is a common theme reported by the offenders in both groups. O'Neill (2017) reports that out of the 14 recently released female offenders in Northern Ireland interviewed in her research, only three had secured employment in the nine months following their release. One participant reported being laid off one month after her return from prison, with the financial impact being extremely difficult for her family, with importance of working being linked to the self-worth of the participants (O'Neill, 2017). Similarly, Mahoney and Karatzias (2012) suggest that unemployment and other socially devaluing factors, such as financial stress, significantly increase the propensity of offending. In keeping with these findings, of the sixteen participants, six RVO and four OVO report limited employment, with only two participants in the dataset reporting stable employment, both of whom had committed one crime. Reasons for unemployment range from a lack of motivation to mental health difficulties, chaotic lifestyles, and addiction.

While past studies have reported a higher rate of reconviction amongst those living in unstable conditions, the causal relationship between homelessness and offending is a difficult and complex one to define. Thus, a



more accurate assumption is that criminal offending is both a cause and an effect of an unstable living environment (Seymour, 2004). Of the OVO participants, four report having a permanent residence, with two reporting previous periods of homelessness. OVO 4 and 7 both expressed uncertainty with regard to the nature of their living situation upon release, with them reporting that they will not be able to return to the area in which they once lived.

Similarly, the repeat offenders report 'several addresses in recent years', reflecting a degree of instability (RVO 4). RVO 1 reports being in care from the age of 14 due to her mother's inability to manage her 'erratic and aggressive behaviour'. Only one participant reports having previously had a permanent address, which was eventually lost due to drug addiction (RVO 2). Half of the participants report an unstable living situation, including being temporarily released to a hostel and then returning to custody, periods of homelessness, and living in areas of reportedly high antisocial behaviour, where criminal activity is engaged in frequently.

### **Support**

This theme provides an insight into the positive and negative interpersonal influences, as well as engagement with professional support, and the impact that these interventions may have had on their offending behaviour.

The OVO group reports supportive relationships, such as OVO 1 who lives near her sisters and other family members who 'attempt to remove negative elements from her company', with her sister helping her to manage her finances. Poor interpersonal relationships and negative peer influences are also reported: OVO 1, 5, and 6 report a current unstable relationship status, with on/off relationships, and one non-contact order in place, and OVO 2 committed her offence with her partner. OVO 4 is estranged from her children, who were raised by her parents, and then their fathers when she left for a new relationship. OVO 6 similarly has a strained relationship with her children, who are known to social services for suspected emotional abuse. She also has ongoing issues with an ex-partner, who now has a new child with the woman against whom the offence was committed.

Very little reference is made to any positive relationships experienced by the repeat offenders. Contrastingly, negative relationships are reported in all participants: RVO 1 is reported as surrounding 'herself with negative persons': she is currently in a relationship with a prolific offender, and associates 'with

known drug users'. This is similarly seen with RVO 2 who socialises with 'negative peer associates', and RVO 3 whose partner is known to PBNI.

RVO 2 and 3 have limited contact with their family, with both RVO 2 and 4 having other family members raising their children. This is similarly seen with RVO 6, whose children have been placed in the care of her grandmother due to her addiction and neglect. RVO 5 reports a challenging family situation: her two older children are with their father and her other two younger children are in care, and she reports having a turbulent relationship with her mother, who was emotionally abusive. Furthermore, she is the youngest of three children, one of whom is deceased, and the other has serious mental health difficulties.

Stable intimate relationships, positive peer relationships, and social support networks have all been identified as effective protective factors for offenders (Mahoney and Karatzias, 2012). The OVO group reports family members living nearby and actively engaging in supportive behaviours, including assisting in the management of finances. The RVO group reports strained familial relationships, complete social isolation in the community, and estrangement from their own children.

Engagement with professional intervention was polarised in the groups: RVO frequently rejected support from professional intervention, whereas the OVO report improvement by working with mental health professionals. Three participants from the OVO group have reported receiving successful professional intervention by attending addiction groups and agreeing to referral for self-esteem issues, demonstrating a desire for personal growth (OVO 1), and victim awareness programmes (OVO 2). OVO 3 experiences PTSD following an IRA bombing, but she did not recognise this 'until working with psychologists in prison'. Unsuccessful intervention is reported only by OVO 8, who completed an alcohol-management programme, but did not feel it was personally relevant to her. There is very little engagement with mental health professionals within the RVO group: three have rejected support and refuse to engage in offence-focused work, with RVO 1 reporting a general mistrust of professionals.

### ***Individual characteristics***

Differences in individual characteristics is another theme that emerges. This provides insight into the physical and mental health of the participants, and personal characteristics — including temperament, personality, personal

skills, feelings of responsibility and remorse, and engagement in risk-taking behaviours — are all factors that may influence the offending behaviour of the participants and act as maintaining factors for antisocial behaviour.

Most OVO participants report mental health difficulties (n=6). Common reports included anxiety and depression (n=3), PTSD (n=1), and personality disorders (n=2). OVO 1 reports being in receipt of benefits for anxiety and depression, with her mental health issues affecting her ability to find and maintain employment, an issue she has been dealing with for over 20 years. OVO 4 is described as 'easily irritated, demanding', with 'anger issues', as well as being 'impulsive'. OVO 3 reports suffering from complex PTSD due to traumatic experiences in her past, including the death of her mother and experiences of bombings when she was growing up.

In terms of mental health issues in the RVO group, poor psychological wellbeing is reported in seven out of eight participants. Depression (n=1), anxiety (n=1), deliberate self-harm (n=3), suicidal ideation (n=3), psychosis (n=1), and addiction (n=3) are all mentioned in the reports. RVO 4 reports an 'unstructured transient lifestyle characterised by misuse of alcohol and prescription drugs' that led to substantial mental health difficulties. She also feels that her mental health further deteriorated after experiences of rape, which led to psychotic episodes, and a history of self-harm, all further maintained by a history of poor coping skills.

The literature indicates that female offenders, especially those who have experienced trauma, are more likely to have histories of mental illness when compared to male offenders and females in the general population (Bloom and Covington, 2009). Thus, it is no surprise that these issues were reported in both groups, with anxiety and depression being most frequently reported in the OVO group. The repeat offenders report more heterogeneous issues, including self-harm and suicidal ideation. This group discrepancy in mental health difficulties is similarly stated by Weizmann-Henelius *et al.* (2004), who report that women who commit violent offences against strangers have reported involvement in prior offending, and report more psychiatric disturbances and substance misuse.

Reference is made to feelings of responsibility, as well as a capacity to exhibit remorse for the offences. While little reference to this individual characteristic is made in the OVO group, there are reported instances in the RVO group (n=3). It would appear that all three participants display distorted thinking, and an inability to see from the perspective of others. Furthermore, more reference is made to the risk-taking behaviours of the RVO (n=3) in

which the participants have engaged in impulsive and aggressive actions, with a lack of consequential thinking. For example, RVO 3 is said to minimise her behaviour and the impact it has had on others, with RVO 5 having demonstrated a limited level of responsibility and control 'particularly when she perceives she is being judged by others'.

### ***Substance misuse***

Substance misuse is reported frequently in the OVO (n=7). While some report drug misuse during their teenage years, the present substance abuse mostly refers to alcohol. Historical substance abuse is reported by half of the participants: OVO 4 has been abusing alcohol for decades, and she engages in aggressive behaviour, which she feels is fuelled by alcohol and prescription drugs. Moreover, intoxication at the time of the offence is reported. OVO 5 reports rarely drinking but being drunk at the time of the offence, and she was experiencing stress as well, impacted by relationship issues and the alcohol. OVO 1 reports having an alcohol problem to the point that her sister helps her manage her finances as she would 'just drink the money', and reports drinking heavily at the time her offence was committed, when she was:

...so highly intoxicated she doesn't remember it and police confirmed she could not be interviewed for 11 hours. (OVO 1).

All repeat offenders report drug and/or alcohol issues, showing substance abuse as chronic. It is reported that both alcohol and drugs were a feature of the offending: RVO 1 was under the influence at the time of the offence, and she demonstrates poor reasoning skills when generally under the influence of alcohol. She reports starting at the age of 14, which eventually escalated into Class A drugs by the age of 16, and reports that heroin was a major factor in her life. RVO 8 reports using opioids and prescription medication, which eventually led to suicidal ideation, and she believes that this addiction, and her excessive alcohol consumption, are a factor in her offending. RVO 2 reports losing her permanent address due to her heroin addiction, and she discloses that it has played a part in her inability to gain significant employment.

Alcohol and drugs appear to be used by some of the participants as a coping strategy. RVO 4 reports her alcohol consumption as getting worse since the death of her sister, and RVO 5 reports 'misusing alcohol to deal with her disruptive upbringing and trauma'. RVO 6 reports addiction issues

following the death of an aunt, and RVO 1 reports using cannabis as a way to desensitise herself from her difficult personal circumstances.

Substance misuse was reported in all but one of the sixteen participants. Mannerfelt and Håkansson (2018) report that female offenders have a heavier pattern of drug use than males. Interestingly, there are differences between the two groups in this study: the OVO report very little drug use, with references instead to alcohol intoxication while committing the crime. Drug abuse is frequently reported in the RVO, characterised by lengthy abuse. It appears to have a distinct function, being reported frequently amongst the RVO as a type of coping mechanism and form of self-medication. Furthermore, the negative impact of the addiction is not minimised: participants attribute their loss of accommodation and mental health deterioration to the substance misuse.

### ***Violence and trauma***

Finally, most participants in both groups report experiences of historical abuse, domestic violence, and singular traumatic events that they believe shaped their later perceptions and behaviour, including bereavement, threat to life, sexual assault, and abandonment.

OVO participants report experiencing domestic violence (DV) in current and past relationships (n=6). OVO 3 discloses having a volatile relationship with her husband, characterising the relationship as 'controlling', involving physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. She tried to leave the marriage but felt her personal safety was more at risk, so she stayed. OVO 4 had a similarly controlling relationship with her husband: she reports her husband financially controlling her, with the money she received being spent on alcohol, causing contention in the relationship. OVO 8 describes her relationship with her current partner as 'loving' but 'controlling and abusive'. Experiences of DV are not limited to current relationships: OVO 1, 2, and 3 report experiencing violence at a young age, from parental figures and other family members.

Relationships of the repeat offenders are described as volatile, with significant histories of DV reported. RVO 3 reports DV with her current partner, who is under probation supervision. RVO 5 reports that an ex-partner is serving time for attempting to murder her, and discloses that 'three of four recent relationships ended due to domestic violence'. Moreover, RVO 7 reports having two long-term relationships as a young person that were both physically abusive. She 'discloses domestic violence, broken jaw and other injuries'.

Historical sexual abuse is disclosed in both groups: OVO 7 reports being subjected to 'sexual offences from the age of 10 and raped age 13'. Past sexual abuse is disclosed by RVO 1 and 3, by family members and neighbours during childhood and adolescence. RVO 1 discloses past 'sexual abuse from her older brother', with RVO 3 reporting child sexual abuse by neighbours and friends.

Traumatic singular events are reported by the OVO: OVO 1 recalls a traumatic childhood and adolescence, including abandonment by her mother who left when she was 7 or 8. Others report recent bereavement and loss: OVO 3 had discovered her husband after he had tried to take his own life, and 'feels that this event changed his personality'. Furthermore, both OVO 3 and 7 report the death of their mothers as having had an impact on their development. Threats against life were experienced by OVO 3 and 8, with OVO 3 reporting:

She was present with her younger siblings at time of IRA bomb during troubles and feels this was a significant and traumatic event in her life. She became separated from younger siblings at the time of the blast but both survived. She experiences post-traumatic stress following this event. (OVO 3).

Seven out of eight RVO report significant experiences of bereavement: RVO 1 has an extensive history of loss, including a friend's suicide and an ex-boyfriend's death from a drug overdose. RVO 2 had a baby with her ex-partner, and the baby died after a few weeks, resulting in a heroin relapse and further offending and custody. Experiences of murder are also reported by the participants: RVO 5 reports poor emotional wellbeing as a result of various circumstances surrounding family bereavements, including the suicide of a sibling and the murder of her uncle who was 'shot dead', with RVO 8 reporting a 'close family member was murdered when she was [a] young teen'.

Rape is reported by three of the RVO: RVO 2 reports threats from the paramilitaries in the area where she lived, and being previously raped by them. RVO 3 was raped at the age of 22 and had a child from this experience, and RVO 4 reports a distinct deterioration in her mental health after experiencing rape by two different men.

As reported by Willis and Levenson (2016), cumulative trauma has been associated with a greater likelihood of psychosocial problems, setting the stage for unhealthy relational patterns, which may contribute to abusive

behaviours and the utilisation of maladaptive coping behaviours. This in turn increases the likelihood of mental health issues, addictions, and engagement in criminal behaviours (Willis and Levenson, 2016). All participants within the dataset mention some form of trauma, substantiating research which suggests that there is a higher prevalence of experiences of adversity, victimisation, and trauma among female offenders (Bowen *et al.*, 2018). For example, DV was reported by both groups. Most women in the criminal justice system report unstable intimate relationships, and they are more likely to be involved in abusive relationships and report high instances of victimisation (Comartin *et al.*, 2018). O'Neill (2017) reports that nine out of the fourteen female offenders reported experiences of both historical and recent DV, with other trauma including bereavement and loss, as well as substance misuse, and mental health difficulties.

## Conclusion

The findings in this article are based primarily on the transcribed excerpts of data received by the PBNi on eight females who committed one violent offence, and eight females who have repeatedly offended. It must be acknowledged that the small sample size is a major limitation of the study, and it is therefore difficult to generalise the findings to the wider population. That being said, the objective of this article was to draw on previous work comparing OVO and RVO profiles and experiences, such as that of Mahoney and Karatzias (2012), and to consider how those findings were echoed in the Northern Irish context.

While studies have shown that RVO and OVO present as distinct subgroups, differing in range factors including psychological wellbeing, the resulting data from this study are not as definitive as that assumption would suggest. While offending, social, psychological, and economic differences are noted, they are not significantly different, and reported differences seem to relate to the depth of negative experiences. For example, while both groups report negative interpersonal relationships, the OVO report receiving more positive support than the RVO, acting as a protective factor. Substance misuse is frequently reported by both groups, but while the OVO report a history of abuse of legal substances (alcohol), it is the repeat offenders who report, and attribute the motivation of their crimes, to heroin and other illegal drugs. That being said, beyond some minor differences in experiences, both groups report significant trauma and adversity, from domestic violence, rape,

and sexual abuse, to experiences of familial loss, mental health issues, and financial difficulties. From the outset and throughout, both RVO and OVO report significant hardships in their lives, with most participants citing these factors as influencing their engagement in violent offending. Thus, while the sample size is small, it is important to acknowledge the extensive adverse experiences reported by each participant, irrespective of the number of crimes they have committed, and to consider the potentially interactive nature of trauma and adversity, and the influence this has on offending behaviours and criminal propensity.

Researchers, such as Covington and Bloom (2004) and O'Neill (2017), demonstrate that women have different pathways into criminality, they respond differently to supervision and imprisonment, they exhibit differences in terms of substance abuse, trauma, mental illness, and employment histories, and they represent different levels of risk within prison and the community. This research highlights the complexity of past and present difficulties experienced by the female offender, and in recognition of this, Probation practice in Northern Ireland has adopted the 'Inspire approach', a gender-informed approach for women under probation supervision (O'Neill, 2011). The Inspire approach is based on the emerging knowledge of what works with women offenders in the community (Gelsthorpe *et al.*, 2007), and the starting point is that gender matters. The primary focus of Inspire is to ensure that women fulfil the requirements of the court order; it does so by adopting a women-centred approach, assisting women to address the impact of their experiences; improving self-esteem, helping them to develop coping strategies, and empowering them to take control of their lives and thus reduce the likelihood of their reoffending — factors that were reported as lacking in the lives of the participants in this study.

Studies that focus exclusively on a female population sample, while increasing in number, are still small in comparison to male studies. Furthermore, studies that focus on the risk and maintaining factors of those who commit one crime and those who chronically offend are even smaller. This study builds on previous literature (Mahoney and Karatzias, 2012) that suggests that repeated exposure to trauma and adversity may play a role in the different violent offending trajectories of OVO and RVO. It reinforces the importance of adopting a gender-informed perspective and approaching female offenders from a different and more individualised point of view, in order to improve understanding of violent female offending, and to tackle the causes of their offending and reduce recidivism.



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