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Research Review

Cost-Effective Correctional Services

KEY WORDS: *cost-benefits, risk-need-responsivity, correctional services, recidivism*

What it means

Correctional services adhering to the principles of Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) are clearly the most cost-effective approaches to reducing recidivism. Given that the services and interventions offered by the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) are rooted in RNR, this conclusion suggests that CSC's approaches represent a fiscally appropriate means of meeting its legislated mandate of assisting offenders to become law-abiding citizens.

What we found

In an analysis of more than fifty separate research studies in various jurisdictions, Romani and colleagues (2012) found that services adhering to the principles of RNR cost about half as much as services that do not adhere to these principles or that reflect traditional methods of punishment.

While initial and daily costs were similar for RNR and non-RNR services, both the length of time required in services and the effectiveness of services in reducing recidivism contributed to large overall differences in cost. Specifically, RNR-based services were found to yield higher rates of success (that is, were more effective at reducing recidivism), therefore saving money in the long-term. Perhaps because of lower effectiveness, participation in non-RNR-based services also tended to last longer, with offenders typically receiving these services for about three months longer than those in RNR-based services.

These findings are underscored by previous research showing that funds spent on CSC's RNR-based programs are outweighed by the savings that program participation creates in areas such as reduced incarceration costs and criminal justice system costs associated with re-offences (Conference Board of Canada, 2009). Though these results are now somewhat dated, there is no reason to expect the conclusion to have changed.

What we looked at

CSC's interventions and services are rooted in the principles of RNR – that is, assessing risk, targeting

criminogenic need areas at intensities appropriate to levels of risk, and choosing interventions capable of resulting in change and appropriate to the offender's characteristics (Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge, 1990).

While interventions and services rooted in RNR have been shown to be effective in reducing recidivism (e.g., Andrews & Bonta, 2010), the cost-effectiveness of RNR approaches had received less attention. The current review therefore summarizes research contrasting the cost-effectiveness of RNR and other approaches in reducing re-offending.

References

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