



Research Summary



ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF OFFENDERS

Question: What offender needs should be addressed by treatment programs?

Background: Criminal offenders have a variety of problems or needs that interfere with them leading a prosocial lifestyle. They may be unemployed, dependent on drugs, suffer from mental illness or have poor self-esteem. The list of difficulties can be extensive, especially for high-risk offenders.

Providing treatment services to offenders can be costly. For example, in 2006-07 the Correctional Service of Canada spent approximately \$26,000,000 on correctional treatment programs with substance abuse programming representing the largest program expenditure (\$7.5 million). Although the financial costs are significant, the research also shows that properly designed and delivered programs can reduce offender recidivism thereby increasing public safety. However, it is very important that these programs specifically target those offender needs that have the greatest impact on altering their criminal behaviour. Providing treatment for needs that have a minimal impact on recidivism would be a poor use of resources. What needs should be addressed in treatment programs has been debated for years but recent research is converging upon a set of needs that appears to have a strong relationship to criminal conduct.

Answer: A review of the offender rehabilitation literature was conducted to

examine the characteristics of interventions that were associated with reductions in recidivism. The review showed that, in general, providing treatment to offenders led to decreases in recidivism (about 10% lower recidivism rate compared to offenders who did not receive treatment). However, some studies were more effective than others. For example, intensive treatment programs were effective with high risk offenders but had little effect on low risk offenders.

When the types of needs targeted by treatment programs were examined it became evident that some offender needs were more important to be addressed than others. Interestingly, treatments that reduced the offender's anxiety or addressed feelings of depression were minimally related to a reduced probability of committing another crime. Even treatments that addressed more serious psychological problems such as hallucinations and delusions showed little relationship to recidivism. Treating these kinds of problems may help individuals feel better but it will not necessarily reduce criminal behaviour.

Seven need areas were identified that when targeted by programs led to significant reductions in recidivism. Three were particularly important. They were criminal attitudes, criminal friends and having an antisocial personality pattern (i.e., impulsive, self-centered, emotionally callous). Successfully addressing these needs through treatment resulted in the

largest reductions in recidivism. Also important but less so were problems in the area of work/school, substance abuse, family/marital relationships and leisure/recreational activities. Together, these seven needs are referred to as criminogenic needs whereas needs that show little relationship to criminal behaviour are called non-criminogenic needs.

3. The criminal justice system's primary goal is to enhance public safety and one way of achieving this goal is to provide programs that address the criminogenic needs of offenders. However, offenders also have other needs and these non-criminogenic needs can be addressed by working collaboratively with mental health agencies to deliver these services.

Policy Implications:

1. Treatment programs for offenders should focus their resources on targeting criminogenic needs in order to have the greatest impact on reducing recidivism.
2. Addressing non-criminogenic needs may be important for removing barriers to dealing with criminogenic needs and increasing the offender's motivation to participate in programming. Treatment providers should not completely ignore non-criminogenic needs but should be aware of the limitations of treating only non-criminogenic needs.

Source: Bonta, J. & Andrews, D. A. (2010). Viewing offender assessment and treatment through the lens of the risk-need-responsivity model. In F. McNeil, P. Raynor & C. Trotter (Eds.), *Offender supervision: New directions in theory, research and practice* (pp. 19-40). New York, NY: Willan Publishing.

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