WHAT WORKS FOR SEXUAL OFFENDERS?

Question: Do the principles of effective intervention for general offenders also apply to treatments for sexual offenders?

Background: Although there is general agreement that certain forms of intervention can effectively reduce the recidivism rates of general offenders, there is less agreement about the effectiveness of treatment for sexual offenders. Sex offenders are often considered to have unique characteristics (e.g., sexual deviance), which may be particularly hard to change or manage. For general offenders, the interventions that have proved to be the most successful are those that follow the principles of risk, need and responsivity (RNR). The risk principle states that the most resources should be directed to the offenders with the highest risk of recidivism, with little or no interventions for the lowest risk offenders. The need principle directs intervention toward factors related to recidivism risk (criminogenic needs), and the responsivity principle tells treatment providers to adapt interventions to the personal learning style of the offenders.

The validity of the RNR principles for general offenders has been documented in a large number of studies and reviews. Previous reviews of the sexual offender treatment studies have noted different results for different treatments. The current review examined the extent to which this variation in treatment outcome can be explained by adherence to the RNR principles.

Method: A thorough review of the sexual offender treatment literature was conducted, identifying 23 studies that met basic criteria for research quality. The effectiveness of treatment was measured by comparing the recidivism rates of treated and untreated offenders. Each treatment was then coded by an independent, impartial rater as to the extent to which it adhered to the RNR principles.

Answer: Across all treatments, the recidivism rates for the treated offenders was lower than the rates for the comparison groups for both sexual recidivism (11% versus 19%, sample size of 6,746) and general recidivism (32% versus 48%, sample size of 4,801).

The treatments that were most effective were those that adhered to the RNR principles of effective corrections. On average, the treatments that followed all three principles showed recidivism rates that were less than half the recidivism rates for the comparison groups. In contrast, the

KEEPING CANADIANS SAFE

EFFECTIVE PRISON MANAGEMENT

Question: What steps can be taken to more effectively manage prisons?

Answer: Prison administrators have available a range of rewards and punishments to manage the behaviour of inmates. For example, solitary confinement may be used to punish undesirable behaviour. However, there is also a long history of using rewards to encourage desirable behaviour. As early as 1840, good behaviour was being rewarded with early release from prison.

In the 1960s and 1970s behaviour modification programs were heralded as a promising approach to managing prisons. Although, punishment was part of many of these programs, the systematic application of rewards for good behaviour was at the forefront. One advantage of rewards over punishment is that rewards can teach new prosocial behaviours whereas punishment can only suppress behaviour.

One type of program that emphasized rewards was token economics. Token economies provide immediate tangible rewards for good behaviour and emphasize personal responsibility for acquiring rewards. For example, daily attendance at an educational program could be rewarded with a small amount of money, toothpaste, extra TV time or some other benefit not freely available in the prison.

Evaluations of these programs demonstrated that, on average, they could significantly improve desirable behaviours among the inmate population. Unfortunately, these
programs essentially disappeared from the correctional landscape by the early 1990s for two reasons. First, the punishment component of some of the programs led to court challenges and abuses by the staff. Second, the most effective programs were complex to manage requiring extensive staff training and monitoring. Nevertheless, these behaviour modification programs may provide valuable lessons for today.

Policy Implications:

1. As prison populations increase, it will become more difficult to manage prisons effectively. In addition to trying new and innovative management practices, the research on behaviour modification programs should be consulted to learn from the past.

2. Although punishment is needed in certain circumstances, the emphasis should be placed on rewarding the good behaviour of inmates.

3. In order to deliver effective programs that reward good behaviour and make offenders responsible for their behaviour, prison administrators must recognize that this requires a considerable investment of resources.


For further information:

James Bonta, Ph.D.  
Corrections Research  
Public Safety Canada  
340 Laurier Avenue West  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P8  
Phone: 613-991-2831  Fax: 613-990-8295  
E-mail: Jim.Bonta@ps.gc.ca

Also available on Public Safety Canada’s website at: www.PublicSafety.gc.ca