

## OFFENDER REHABILITATION

**Question:** Is offender treatment effective in reducing recidivism and criminal victimization?

**Background:** Enhancing community safety is a major goal of corrections. One way of attaining this goal is to adopt strategies which reduce the offender recidivism. In the 1970s and 1980s there was widespread disillusionment with the effectiveness of treatment programs to reduce recidivism. Today however, recent research demonstrates that some programs can reduce the likelihood of offenders returning to crime.

**Method:** The literature on offender rehabilitation and criminal sanctions as approaches to decreasing recidivism were reviewed. Criminal sanctions refer to the judicial disposition (e.g., a sentence of probation or imprisonment without regard to treatment). In the review, the impact of variations in criminal sanctions (e.g., more versus less probation) on recidivism were examined. With respect to offender rehabilitation, earlier reviews failed to distinguish between programs that could be expected to be effective based upon current

knowledge and theory from programs that were inconsistent with theory and evidence. This failure to distinguish among treatment programs undoubtedly contributed to the pessimistic conclusions about the effectiveness of treatment. Therefore, treatment programs were categorized as either “appropriate” or “inappropriate”. Appropriate programs are those which match the intensity of treatment to the offender’s risk level (Risk Principle), target criminogenic needs such as antisocial attitudes (Need Principle) and use cognitive-behavioral approaches to facilitate offender change (Responsivity Principle).

**Answer:** Appropriate treatments were found to reduce recidivism an average of 50% compared to inappropriate treatments. These are the programs that systematically assess offender risk and needs with objective instruments, target the criminogenic needs of offenders in treatment and use cognitive-behavioral approaches to influence behaviour. Programs categorized as inappropriate, for example, intensive programs that dealt with low risk offenders and targeted non-criminogenic needs such as self-esteem demonstrated no reductions

in recidivism. Inappropriate treatments were actually associated with slight *increases* in recidivism.

A similar pattern of results was found for criminal justice sanctions. That is, more severe sanctions did not reduce re-offending but increased recidivism. Further, an analysis of specific types of sanctions found no one type of sanction particularly effective in reducing recidivism. Regardless of whether the offenders were subjected to longer prison sentences, boot camps, random drug testing, and the like, none showed reductions in recidivism approaching the results found with appropriate offender rehabilitation programs.

#### Policy Implications:

1. Protection of the public can be enhanced by providing appropriate treatment programs for offenders.
2. Appropriate programs are those that:

- a) match the level of service to the offenders level of risk;
  - b) target criminogenic needs;
  - c) use a cognitive-behavioral approach
3. Reliable assessments of risk and criminogenic needs are available. These instruments can be used to match services to risk and select criminogenic needs for treatment.
  4. Cognitive-behavioral treatment techniques should be encouraged for use with offenders.
  5. The strict application of punitive approaches fail to demonstrate reductions in offender recidivism and thereby provide a limited contribution to public safety.

**Source:** Bonta, J. (1997). Offender Rehabilitation: From Research to Practice (User Report No. 1997-01). Ottawa: Department of the Solicitor General of Canada.

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