



Research Summary



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TRAINING IN EVIDENCE-BASED COMMUNITY SUPERVISION

Question: Can training improve the effectiveness of community supervision?

Background: The majority of offenders are under some form of community supervision. In Canada, there are approximately 95,000 offenders under probation or parole supervision. Community supervision is often seen as an appropriate sanction for low risk offenders and also an effective way of re-integrating higher risk offenders into the community. Despite the widespread use of community supervision, relatively little is known about its effectiveness. One review of the literature found that probation or parole supervision had a minimal impact on offender recidivism.

We do know, however, that offender treatment programs that follow the principles of risk (treat higher risk offenders), need (target criminogenic needs) and responsivity (use cognitive-behavioural techniques of influence) are associated with the largest reductions of recidivism (Research Summary, Vol. 12, No. 6). Yet, when the everyday practices of probation officers were examined, researchers found only modest adherence to the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) principles (Research Summary, Vol. 13, No. 6). These findings suggest a need to train probation officers to follow the

important principles of effective offender rehabilitation.

Method: A three-day training program was developed around the RNR principles. The training taught staff how to appropriately model and reward prosocial behaviours and to develop a positive rapport with the offenders that they supervised. The training showed the importance of targeting criminogenic needs but also paid particular attention to the procriminal attitudes of offenders and how the attitudes influenced behaviour. Participants in the training learned to address the procriminal attitudes of offenders and to use cognitive-behavioural techniques to replace these attitudes with prosocial attitudes.

Probation officers from three Canadian provinces were randomly assigned to either training or to a no training control condition. Those who received the training were also asked to meet on a monthly basis to receive clinical support in order to further develop their skills. During the project, all of the probation officers audiotaped some of their sessions with their clients so that researchers could assess the type of behaviours used in the supervision of offenders.

Answer: Analyses of nearly 300 audiotapes clearly showed that experimental probation officers applied the behaviours taught during training. Compared to the control or “business as usual” officers, the trained officers spent more of the sessions discussing the criminogenic needs of their clients and less time on irrelevant topics of discussion.

Compared to the control group, the trained probation officers also were more focused on the procriminal attitudes of the offenders and were more likely to use cognitive-behavioural techniques to replace them with prosocial attitudes. A two-year follow-up of the clients of the officers found a recidivism rate of 25.3% for the offenders supervised by the trained officers and a rate of 40.5% for the untrained officers. Furthermore, active participation in the monthly clinical support session found even lower recidivism rates (22%).

Policy Implications:

1. Training that is in adherence with the RNR principles can reduce offender recidivism by 15 percentage points, reductions comparable to what has been found in “real world” offender rehabilitation programs.
2. Probation and parole agencies should not only consider training their staff in following the RNR principles but also develop policies that encourage staff to apply RNR-based skills in their supervision of offenders.
3. Many skills that are taught in training programs deteriorate over time. In order to avoid the deterioration of skills, and in fact improve skills, on-going clinical support should be a mandatory feature of training.

Source: Bonta, J., Bourgon, G., Rugge, T., Scott, T.-L., Yessine, A., Gutierrez, L., & Li, J. (2010). *The Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision: Risk-Need-Responsivity in the Real World*. User Report 2010-01. Ottawa: Public Safety Canada.

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