

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Bringing Sense and Sensitivity to Corrections:

From Programs to 'Fix' Offenders to Services to Support Desistance

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Encouraging Offender Desistance

Summary/Conclusions

The author of this article, Frank Porporino, is one of the co-authors of the Reasoning and Rehabilitation cognitive restructuring program. The content of the document was submitted to the National Institute of Corrections, as a Research in Brief and delivered as a presentation at the International Community Corrections Association's Research Conference in October 2008. The author proffers the idea of moving beyond evidence-based practices to "change" offender behavior to incorporating elements of desistance theory in helping offenders find reasons for change. Change resulting from a combination of tools may bring about desistance sooner and produce the long-lasting changes necessary for reducing recidivism.

Limitations of Information

The author notes that there is a lot of evidence for the risk management framework, which Colorado uses to classify and treat offenders. Although he suggests that desistance theory should inform our case management, he concludes the theory "unfortunately lacks any sort of organized practice framework." As a result, the practical applications that have been researched are limited.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Colorado, like many other states, uses a risk management framework to supervise offenders in the community. Much research concludes using a risk/need assessment, with case planning and good treatment matching, results in offender behavior change. Additionally, cognitive behavioral-based programs have been evidenced to reduce recidivism rates. The author puts forth an argument for expanding our current evidence based (EBP) efforts, noting that the field could be having a more pronounced effect by employing elements of desistance theory.

Desistance theory analyzes the "forces and influences" that can underpin offender change." In other words, it attempts to explain why offenders stop offending. Used in conjunction with current EBP, the author suggests an offender's desistance may be hastened by probation's intervention. The theory describes "how exactly offenders go about constructing new pro-social identities for themselves." Offenders find support for these new identities from family or social networks. Some correlates to desistance are steady employment, education, marriage, and peer change.

The author suggests that probation officers need to help the offender to desist, while using EBP to treat. Highlighted is motivational interviewing (MI), which assists the offender in exploring their ambivalence and reluctance to change. If the risk theory and desistance theory were combined, the offender would not be assessed and automatically sent to treatment; but, the probation officer would spend the necessary time exploring ambivalence and allowing the of-

fenders to decide which options for treatment they could agree upon, resulting in outcomes more congruent with their goals and values instead of the system's goals.

The desistance theory lends itself to purposeful individualized case plans, with goals important to the offender, while engaging family and social support networks to a higher degree. It also means listening to offenders, rather than telling them what they will do.

Practical Applications

- √ Evaluate and meet basic needs first before expecting compliance in treatment.
- √ Monitor readiness for change and prioritize action in areas of high motivation.
- √ Engage families and social networks to help the offender desist.
- √ Ensure case plans include goals that are important to the offender and are individualized to reflect each offender's strengths and needs, as *they* identify them.
- √ Use MI to explore ambivalence and expose the incongruence between the offender's behavior and his goals.
- √ Be sensitive to the offender's viewpoint, expressing empathy.
- √ Listen for change talk and spend time getting the offender moving toward action by offering resources and referrals.
- √ Clarify what the offender values in his life and focus on strategies that will work for the offender to accomplish his goals.

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