

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Exploring the Black Box of Community Supervision

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Supervision Content Matters

Summary/Conclusions

In this article, Bonta et al. describe the results of a 2001 study conducted with probation in Manitoba, Canada. With approximately 57% of all probation officers agreeing to participate, the researchers collected data on assessments, reviewed files, and listened to audio tapes of supervision meetings. Analyses were conducted on information gathered from both adult and juvenile cases. The researchers used the data to determine: 1. how closely the probation officers followed the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) principle in managing offenders, and 2. how closely adherence to the RNR principle related to recidivism.

Limitations of Information

The researchers began the study with 62 probation officers and requested case information on four offenders from each officers' caseloads. Researchers were only able to obtain data on 154 offenders. The number of responses in some categories were also limited over time, due to attrition of offenders. For example, the sample size for the first audiotapes was 103, while the second and third audiotapes totaled 54 offenders.

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.

The "purpose of this study was to better understand how probation officers use risk-need assessments to formulate their case plans and how they manage their cases." With a sample of officers and offenders in Manitoba, Canada, the researchers collected data on adults and juveniles from 2001 to 2002. Although their samples were limited in size, the researchers found no statistical difference between the probation officers or the offenders who participated in the program and those officers and offenders who did not participate. Using assessments, audio tapes, and file reviews the researchers analyzed the content of supervision meetings.

"The Risk Principle of effective rehabilitation states that the intensity of intervention should be matched to the risk level of the offender." Results indicated that the highest risk offenders received the most contacts, while there was no statistical difference between the low and medium risk assessed probationers. The principle was not evident in juvenile supervision, where there was no statistical difference in the frequency of contacts for low, medium, or high risk delinquents.

"The Need Principle makes a distinction between two types of offender needs: criminogenic and noncriminogenic needs." Prior research shows that addressing criminogenic needs can reduce the risk of re-offending. The present study found that just 39.4% of the criminogenic needs identified through assessment were included in case plans. For example, two of the "Big 4" criminogenic needs are anti-social attitudes and anti-social peers; however, these two needs were "only mentioned in a few cases."

In supervision sessions, the researchers found the more time an officer devoted to addressing criminogenic needs and less time on T's & C's, the lower the recidivism. Specifically, "In sessions where less than 15 minutes was spent discussing the probation conditions [T's & C's], the recidivism rate, after adjusting for risk, was 18.9%, but the rate was 42.3% when more than 15 minutes was devoted to this topic."

Practical Applications

- ✓ Complete a quality assessment and trust the risk level to drive the level of services. High risk probationers should have 40-70% of their time structured (ie: work, office visits, treatment), whereas low risk probationers require minimal intervention.
- ✓ Prioritize the "Big 4" criminogenic need areas in case plans: anti-social attitude, anti-social associates, anti-social personality and impulse control.
- ✓ Limit your discussions about T's & C's and use the majority of your contact addressing criminogenic needs.
- ✓ Address just a few items in contact sessions, so as not to overwhelm the probationer.
- ✓ Address anti-social statements and behavior immediately. When a probationer has demonstrated anti-social thinking or behavior, consider working through a Thinking Report with him. Thinking Reports are available from T4C facilitators or the Brain Train course.
- ✓ Remember, over-supervising low risk probationers can actually make things worse. Avoid disrupting or interfering with their pro-social activities.