The Community Risk/Needs Management Scale: An effective supervision tool

I*n practice, the analysis of offender risk and needs is the basis of many decisions made about community supervision requirements (such as frequency of contact) and program placement.*[2] *It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the Correctional Service of Canada's and the National Parole Board's Standards for Conditional Release Supervision require a "systematic method of assessing the needs of the offender, the risk of reoffending, and any other factors which might affect the offender's successful reintegration into the community."*[3]

To comply with national standards for conditional release supervision, Correctional Service of Canada parole officers have been using the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale since 1990 (see page 9). This instrument incorporates case-specific information on criminal history and a critical set of case needs to classify federal offenders on conditional release.

This article illustrates the value of systematically monitoring offender risk and needs levels and how the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale can be used to reflect changes in the conditional release population over time.

Design

The Community Risk/Needs Management Scale was clearly intended to focus supervision resources to ensure that changes in an offender's behaviour, attitudes and circumstances while under community supervision could be monitored.[4] However, the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale's design had purposely followed the Case Management Strategies (CMS) approach to assessing offender needs[5] using a protocol called the Force-field Analysis of Needs. The CMS approach to offender assessment, developed in the mid-west United States for youthful probationers, was adopted by the Correctional Service of Canada to assess the individual case needs of federally sentenced adult prisoners. While the Force-field Analysis of Needs provided a way to make more objective and systematic judgments about offender risk and needs, it did not consider the context of the offender (preadmission versus postrelease) or changes in the offender over time and across different settings. As a result, the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale was developed which put into practice a simple scheme (combining Criminal History Risk and Case Needs assessments) that would allow parole officers to classify offenders when released into the community and, then, every six months, until the end of the offender's sentence.

Criminal History Risk Assessment. To assess risk (of reoffending) systematically and consistently, parole officers use the Statistical Information on Recidivism (SIR) Scale,[6] which has been officially adopted by the National Parole Board as a release-risk scoring system. The SIR Scale involves an extensive review of an individual's official criminal record including 15 risk-related items (such as age, number and variety of criminal convictions, breaches of trust, etc.). In addition, parole officers use two other sources of criminal history information to determine the level of criminal history in an objective, reliable and accurate way. Parole officers also use the National Parole Board's overall assessment of risk

(such as low versus not low) and their own judgment of criminal history risk which is based on a thorough review of an offender's criminal record.

Case Needs Assessment. The needs areas selected for this part of the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale are similar to those in most needs assessment instruments used in other jurisdictions.[7] Twelve areas are covered: academic/vocational skills, employment pattern, financial management, marital/family relationship, companions/significant others, living arrangements, behavioural/emotional stability, alcohol usage, drug usage, mental ability, health and attitude. Although each area of need is rated (for example, factor seen as an asset to community adjustment, no current difficulties, some need for improvement, considerable need for improvement) according to specified guidelines, an overall rating of need is given simply by compiling parole officer judgments into one of three need levels: low, medium or high.

The appropriate frequency of contact for community supervision is determined by linking the two types of assessments -- criminal history risk and case needs -- in a matrix format, such as high risk/high need (see Table 1).

To ensure that the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale would also accommodate the community supervision needs of sexual offenders and offenders with mental disorders, two special needs categories were included. Additionally, a category of "other" was reserved for offenders who do not meet the criteria but who are viewed by parole officers as meriting a higher rating.

The Community Risk/Needs Management Scale

Case Need Areas:			
Academic/Vocational Skills	No current difficulties	Level of skills causing minor interference	Level of skills causing serious interference
Employment Pattern Stable pattern of employment	No current difficulties	Employment situationcausing minor adjustment problems	Employment situation causing serious adjustment problems
Financial Management Pattern of effective management	No current difficulties	Situation or minor difficulties	Severe difficulties
Marital/family Relationship Pattern of stable and support relationships	No current difficulties	Occasional instability in relationships	Very unstable pattern of rlationships
Companions/Significant others: Pattern of non-criminal and/or positive associations	No current difficulties	Some criminal and/or negative associations	Most criminal and/or negative associations

Accomodation: Pattern of satisfactory accomidation	No current difficulties	Occasional changes in residence or temporarily situated	Frequent changes in residence, or no permanent address
Behaviour/Emotional Stability:	No current difficulties	Behavioural/emtional problems that indicate some need for assistance	Severe behavioural/emotional problems that indicate significant need for assistance
Alcohol Usage:	No current difficulties	Some alcohol usage causing moderate adjustment problems	Frequent or controlled usage causing serious adjustment problems
Drug Usage:	No current difficulties	Some drug usage causing moderate interferance	Frequent or controlled usage causing serious adjustment problems
Mental Ability:	No current difficulties	Defiiencies limit but do no prohibit independent functioning	Deficiencies severely limit independent functioning
Health:	No current difficulties	Physical handicap or illiness that interferes with functioning	Serious physical handicap or illness that severely interferes with functioning
Attitude: Actively involved and reponding consistently well to assistance	No current difficulties	Recognizes problem areas but not receptive to assistance	Unable to rcognize problem areas and not receptive to assistance
Special Needs:	**Sex Offender**	**Mentally Disordered**	**Other**
Case Needs Rating:	**Low**	**Medium**	**High**
Crminal History Risk Rating:	**Low**	**Medium/High**	

Development

The 1988 Field Test[8] and 1995 Operational Review[9] of the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale found that parole officers in the community could easily differentiate federal offenders by the nature and level of risk and needs they presented. Furthermore, these risk/needs assessments were consistently related with conditional release outcome.

Once assessed, offenders were tracked and grouped according to their respective minimum frequency of contact requirement: "periodic" (low risk/low needs), "active" (low risk/medium needs) and "intensive" (low risk/high needs, high risk/low needs, high risk/medium needs, high risk/high needs). These cohorts (both Field Test and Operational Review samples) were tracked over a six-month period. As expected, lower risk/needs offenders were more likely to be successful than higher risk/needs offenders.

Table 1

Criminal History Risk	Case Needs		
	Low	**Medium**	**High**
Low	1/month (periodic)	2/month (active)	4/month (Intensive)
High	4/month (Intensive)	4/month (Intensive)	4/month (Intensive)

By simply combining parole officer assessments of criminal history risk with global ratings of case needs (see Table 2), as many as 95% of offenders on caseload who had been assessed as being low risk/low need were successful within six months of their Community Risk/Needs Management Scale assessment.

On the other hand, substantially fewer offenders assessed as higher risk and higher need were successful (no new offences committed in the six-month follow-up period) while on conditional release.

For the Operational Review sample, it is important to note that the "periodic" (offenders assessed to be low risk/low need) supervision group represented more than one third of the total sample of assessed cases.

Although the "intensive" supervision level group comprised slightly more than one third (37.3%) of the Operational Review sample assessed, slightly more than two fifths of these cases (959 offenders) were assessed to be high risk/high need (16.1% of the total). The remainder of "intensive" supervision cases was made up mostly of medium risk/medium need (336 offenders or 15%) and high risk/ medium need (500 offenders or 22%) cases.

Table 2

Sample	Supervision Level		
	Periodic	**Activee**	**Intensive**
1989 Field Test (453 offenders)	34.4% (94.9%)*	9.7% (86.4%)*	55.9 (64.4%)*
1996 Operational Review (5,968 offenders)	38.9% (96.9%)*	23.8 (92.1%) *	37.3 (83.9) *
*Indicates success rates - the figures in the brackets are the success rates			

As such, offenders assessed to be high risk/high need had the poorest success rate (80%) relative to any other risk/needs level grouping. Therefore, reducing the frequency of supervision for lower risk cases has important implications for the reallocation and refocusing of community resources.

The early pilot work also explored the distribution of the 12 need dimensions of the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale. The purpose of the Field Test was to learn more about each factor in terms of managing community supervision cases.

The Field Test research showed the proportion of offenders suspended within six months as well as other statistically significant relationships between specific need dimensions and the likelihood of suspension.[8] In a similar fashion, the Operational Review sample was examined (Table 3).[9] Statistical analysis revealed that only 1 -- health -- of the 12 need areas assessed for the Operational Review sample did not significantly relate to failure on conditional release.

Table 3

Outcome on Conditional Release for Cases with Identified Needs						
Need Dimension	**% with identified need**		**% suspended within six months**		**Significant statistical relations**	
	Field Test	**Operational Review**	**Field Test**	**Operational Review**	**Field Test**	**Operational Review**
Academic/vocational Skills	20.8	36.6	35.1	14.2	**	***
Employment pattern	35.0	44.2	36.1	13.2	***	***
Financial management	37.0	38.6	37.1	12.9	***	***
Marital/family relations	33.2	27.7	37.3	14.3	***	***
Companions/significant others	40.4	28.2	40.7	15.7	***	***
Accommodation	15.5	11.4	45.7	16.1	***	***
Behavioural/emotional stability	34.8	39.4	34.4	13.2	***	***
Alchol usage	18.6	15.1	46.4	16.3	***	***
Drug usage	15.7	15.9	39.4	17.9	***	***
Mental ability	8.7	4.9	28.2	14.1	ns	**
Health	9.1	17.0	14.6	9.5	ns	ns
Attitude	25.1	10.6	40.2	14.0	***	***
Notes: ns = non-significant; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 Identified need=some need and considerable need for improvement combined						

Application

Presently, the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale is administered and readministered to federal offenders under community supervision by parole officers across Canada. It provides an efficient system for recording criminal history risk and case needs, level of risk and need, required frequency of contact and related background information on each offender (such as release status, sentence expiry). While this scale can be used in hard-copy form, a computerized version is used by the Service's parole officers.

More research

Today, the automated version of the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale can produce a distribution of identified needs for the entire community supervision population. This case-based information represents some 600 parole officers across Canada and reflects both their collective experience and their knowledge of the cases under direct supervision. A distribution of identified needs indicates that employment, financial, marital/family and behavioural/emotional problems are frequent among the community supervision population. Statistical analyses revealed gender differences for only 2 of the 12 need categories: male offenders were more likely than female offenders to experience drug problems while in the community, while female offenders were more likely than male offenders to have health problems.

To examine differences in case needs across the phases of conditional release, the case load snapshot of 5,286 male offenders was collapsed into three groups: 0 to 6 months, 6 to 12 months and 12 months or over. Some interesting, yet different, patterns emerged. Offenders who had been in the community 12 months or longer had a much reduced level of need compared to offenders released more recently.

Table 4 presents the correlations between each need area and suspension of conditional release (within six months of being assessed using the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale) across the three separate phases of release. The majority of case needs, when present, were found to be significantly associated with community supervision failure. There is a consistent pattern in the relationship between identified need and failure across all three phases of release for academic/vocational skills, employment pattern, marital/family relations, companions/significant others and drug usage. In fact, the magnitude of these relationships became stronger as an offender's time out on supervision increased. This has important implications for risk prediction. Previous studies show that static variables, such as criminal history, probably have more predictive power than needs at the early stages of release. There is, however, a good explanation for this in that, over time, if an offender is going to manifest recidivism, it is the dynamic variables (such as employment status, marital/family situation, addictions) that begin to drive the likelihood of recidivism.

Table 4

Relationship between Identified Needs and Outcome by Phase (Pearson r)

Need Dimension	0-6 months	6-12 months	12 months or more
Academic/vocational Skills	0.07**	0.11***	0.11***
Employment pattern	0.09***	0.08**	0.11***
Financial management	0.04	0.09***	0.08***
Marital/family relations	0.06*	0.08**	0.12***
Companions/significant others	0.08**	0.12***	0.12***
Accommodation	0.07**	0.05	0.12***
Behavioural/emotional stability	0.02	0.10***	0.11***
Alchol usage	0.05	0.05	0.15***
Drug usage	0.10***	0.08**	0.14***
Mental ability	0.01	0.06*	0.02
Health	-0.01	0.01	0.03
Attitude	0.06*	0.03	0.04
Notes: ns = non-significant; p'0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 Identified need=some need and considerable need for improvement combined			

The most important assessment variables determining outcome on conditional release were also explored. The categories -- age, criminal history risk level, case needs level and 12 identified needs -- were entered into a stepwise regression equation. For male offenders under community supervision, the variables for predicting outcome (in order of magnitude) included needs level, risk (static) level, age and drug use. For female offenders under community supervision, drug use and marital/family relations were the most important predictors. This finding clearly demonstrates the shift in emphasis that has occurred over the last five years. It appears that the assessment of criminogenic needs, a subset of overall risk, is driving community supervision practices.

Conclusion

By using the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale, the Service has more information about federal offenders under community supervision than it did before. This instrument collects strategic information on the offenders we are dealing with -- where they are, what they are like and what kind of problems they experience when released into the community and while under supervision. While targeting key areas (such as employment and substance abuse) for service delivery has considerable merit, the real challenge is to develop community-based intervention strategies that respond to offender needs.

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