

Increasing the Accuracy of Our Predictions of Recidivism: Offender Needs in the Community

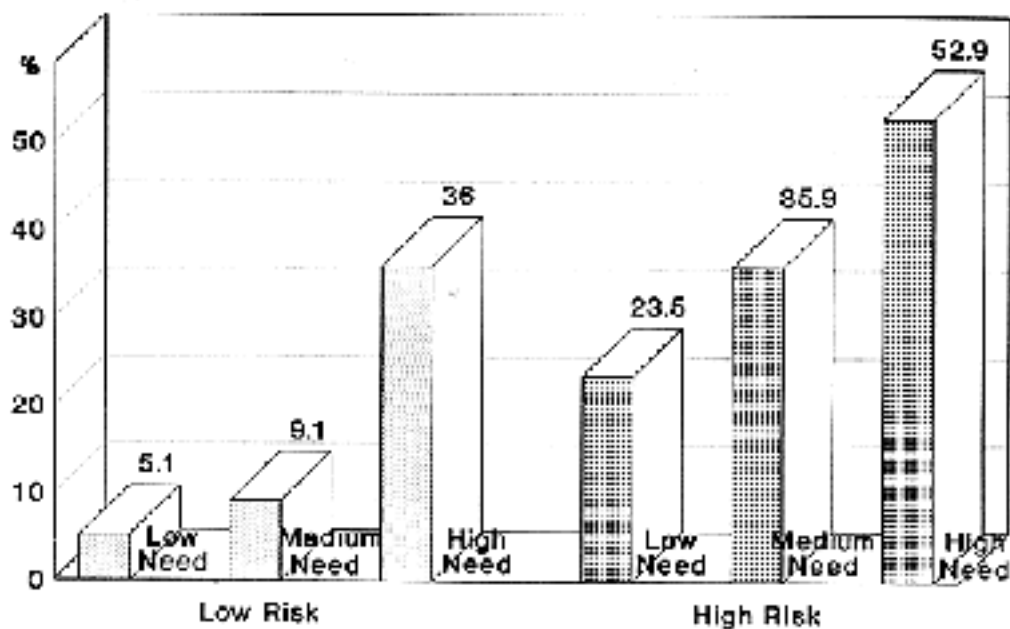
Being unemployed or having a lengthy criminal record isn't necessarily going to cause an offender's return to prison. Problems in the community begin only when an offender's needs start to mount.

In a recent field test of the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale that is being coordinated by the Correctional Service of Canada Research Branch, 453 male offenders were assessed by case managers for a variety of problem areas commonly evidenced among parolees (e.g., employment pattern, financial management, alcohol usage). Criminal records were also reviewed by case managers for risk of reoffending. Subsequently, cases were tracked for a six-month period of community-based supervision.

As expected, the fewer needs offenders had in the community, and the longer they had been under supervision, the less likely they were to be suspended while on conditional release.

Figure 1

Failure Rates for Risk/Needs Levels (6-Month Follow-up)



Interestingly, a major problem area for offenders was companions and/or significant others in the community. It was not the fact that offenders had or did not have personal associations, it was that if offenders lacked positive associates and/or had negative companions (e.g., criminal), they were more likely to have been suspended. Other significant problem areas for offenders under supervision were alcohol usage and marital/family relationships.

These findings suggest that assessment of risk based on criminal history is insufficient to determine who is likely to fail or succeed on conditional release. It is clear that consideration of an offender's needs is

also critical. For example, in examining the effects of combining assessments of criminal history risk and identified needs, it was found that low risk/high need cases had higher failure rates than high risk/low need cases.(1)

Overall, the findings from this research suggest that a "systematic method of assessing the needs of the offender, the risk of reoffending, and any other factors which affect the offender's successful reintegration into the community" is a worthwhile pursuit, especially in light of its potential relevance to conditional release outcomes.

(1)Arbitrarily, we divided the number of needs that were identified into three needs level groupings as follows; low = 0 to 2; medium = 3 to 5; and high = 6+