

An improved risk-assessment process: Ontario Region's Community Offender Management Strategy

The Correctional Service of Canada's 1991 Correctional Strategy requires the Service to ensure that offenders receive the most effective programming at the most appropriate point in their sentence to allow them to serve the greatest possible portion of their sentence successfully in the community. The strategy also requires that effective programs and supervision techniques be in place in the community to assist and support offenders.

In January 1992, representatives from the three Ontario parole districts met as a regional committee to plan Ontario Region's community corrections response to the Correctional Strategy. The group was made up of informatics specialists, community development officers, psychologists, area directors, and representatives from National Headquarters' Research and Statistics Branch and Case Management Division. The result was the Community Offender Management Strategy.

This article provides a chronological overview of the creation and implementation of the Community Offender Management Strategy, as well as a brief description of how it operates. A starting point... The Correctional Strategy recognizes that the Correctional Service of Canada must systematically review offender needs and then offer appropriate and effective programming to meet those needs on a prioritized basis. Therefore, data collection focusing on the needs of conditionally released offenders is a necessity.

Existing 1992 file documentation (such as the Force-field Analysis of Needs and the Community Risk/Need Management Scale) did not capture the kind of information the Service needed to make decisions about appropriate interventions. For example, a rating of *high* in the employment section of the Community Risk/Need Management Scale does not indicate whether the problem is connected to education, vocational skills, poor work history or poor on-the-job interpersonal skills.

Fortunately, another Correctional Strategy project, the Offender Intake Assessment Process, did offer a sufficiently comprehensive information-gathering and assessment system. A key component of this offender admission process is the Case Needs Identification and Analysis process, which examines seven need domains: 1) employment, 2) marital/family, 3) associates/social interaction, 4) substance abuse, 5) community functioning, 6) personal/emotional orientation, and 7) attitude. Unlike the Community Risk/Need Management Scale, each area of need has a variety of indicators to help identify the specific nature, relevance and extent of each need, thereby providing a better basis for intervention.

The regional committee adopted this model, but with a reduced set of indicators focusing on the areas of need that community case-management intervention could best respond to. A list of intervention options was then set out for instances where the level of need warranted intervention. The next step A tool "was subsequently designed along these lines and briefly field tested in anticipation of full implementation in April 1992. The intent was to have parole officers collect and update the needs data twice a year with the data to be collected and then entered into a computer program for statistical analysis.

However, feedback from some parole officers suggested a more striking possibility. With modifications, the Case Needs Identification and Analysis process could become a comprehensive case-management instrument that would allow for the assessment of both risk and needs, the development of a correctional

plan flowing directly from this assessment, and the opportunity to provide a narrative overview of progress. The entire process could be captured in one computer software package that parole officers could use directly bypassing the extra data-entry stage.

This integrated approach would make it easier to collect needs data for program planning and would allow for direct input by the parole officer, and computerization would organize and present the data as a report. Reassessments and the development of new correctional plans would also become less time consuming, as the software would retain as default values the information from previous assessments or plans. Therefore, changes would only have to be made where needed. Implementation National Headquarters quickly approved this new approach on a pilot-project basis. The Western Ontario Parole District informatics specialist submitted a computerized version for testing in a few offices in late October 1992. Several improvements later, the newly named Community Offender Management Strategy (COMS) was implemented in April 1993.

One-day training sessions were conducted in each community parole office and community correctional centre, over the course of three months, focusing on risk assessment and the goals of the Correctional Strategy. Parole officers also received individual instruction, using actual case files. The parole offices began using the software immediately after their training session.

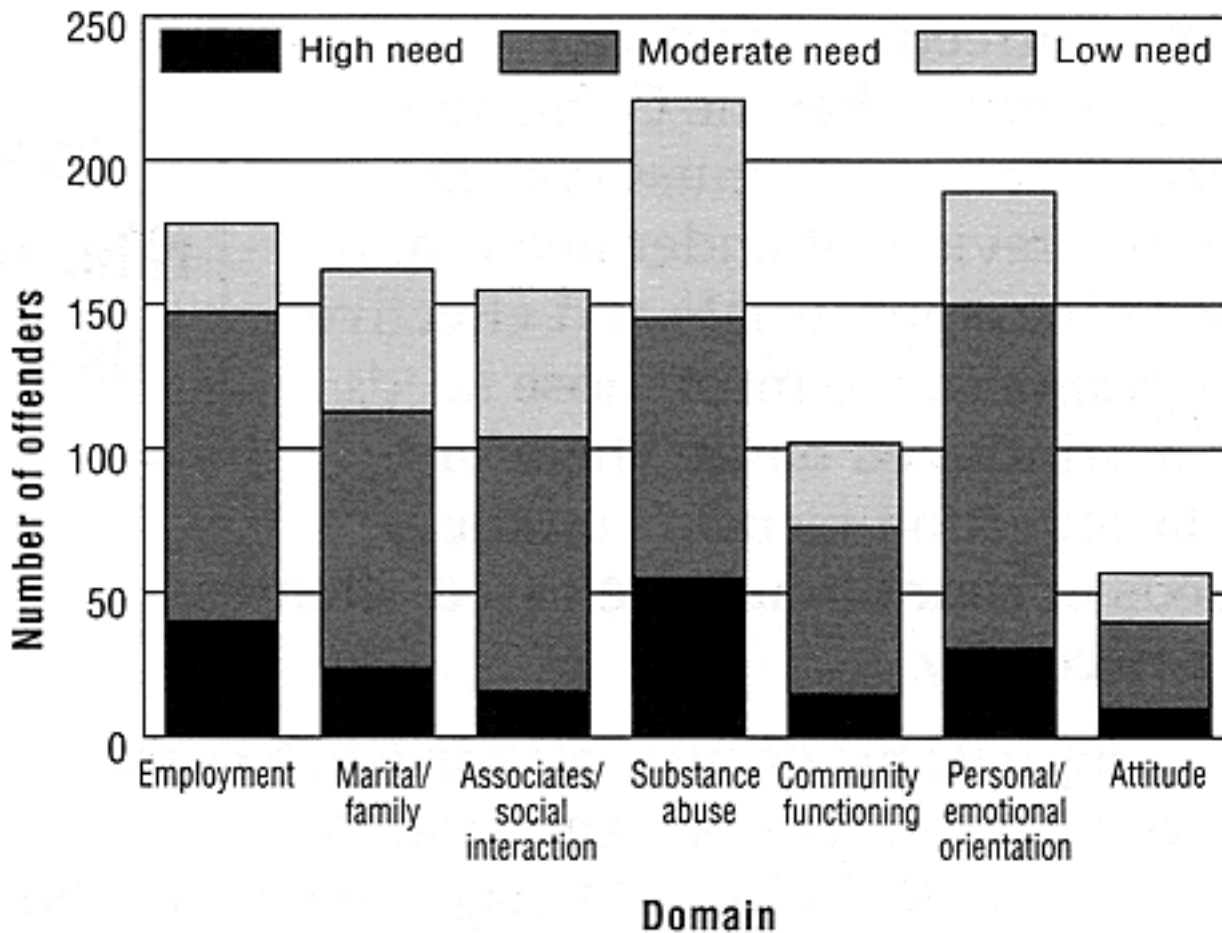
Parole supervisors were told during training (and after) that the program would be modified in response to user feedback, and there has been a steady stream of modifications to the process and report design - almost all resulting from suggestions and criticisms passed on by parole supervisors. This responsiveness to user needs has dramatically improved the product within a very short time.

The process provides a simple and compelling method for systematically reviewing relevant offender needs and criminal history and then producing an overall offender risk rating related to the required minimum frequency of contact with the offender. What's next? An evaluation of the project is currently under way. A questionnaire measuring user acceptance has been completed, and a focus group of parole officers from across Ontario Region has been assembled to review the program. Data from each completed assessment have also been downloaded from every parole officer's computer for future statistical analysis.

In the interim, the data have been profiled in a variety of spreadsheet tables, graphs and charts (for one example, see Figure 1). Eventually, area directors will be able to routinely generate the same kind of reports for their individual offices by downloading their data, using a specifically designed utility program.

Figure 1

Identified Need Levels by Domain for Offenders Under Supervision in the Western Ontario District (for whom COMS data are available)



The program evaluation will also look at a Research and Statistics Branch study that examined the validity of the Case Needs Identification and Analysis process and validated previous findings that there is merit in systematically assessing and re-assessing offender risk and need (see previous article).⁽²⁾ The study found all seven need domains to be significantly correlated with conditional release outcome. Discussion For all of its effectiveness and predictive power, the Community Risk/Need Management Scale was due for revision. Fortunately, the preparatory work had already been accomplished in the Case Needs Identification and Analysis process.

The judgment of case-management officers remains critical to the Community Offender Management Strategy, but by incorporating the specific nature of relevant needs, guidelines for rating risk are on a firmer basis than before.

Perhaps even more important, a direct link between assessment of risk and what to do about it has been forged. Once a need for intervention has been determined, the parole officer is expected to choose, from a standardized list, intervention(s) appropriate to the identified needs. The parole officer then uses these recommended interventions as the basis for a correctional plan - the final outcome of the process.

The Community Offender Management Strategy has also laid the groundwork for a common assessment language for use from the beginning of an offender's sentence to their last day on conditional release. When offenders' circumstances change, which is the whole point of the correctional enterprise, it will be against a backdrop of assessments that consistently refer to the same problems and build on one another in a logical fashion.

The resulting data may ultimately be used in many ways, but the original goal of the Correctional Strategy remains paramount. Particular and general information about offender needs is being generated, along with the recommended interventions to meet those needs. Area office, district office, and even regional office "rollup data" can then provide a firm basis for allocating precious resources.

Despite its apparent value, it is still too early to judge the project an unqualified success. Some parole supervisors are still struggling with computers, and the initial assessment is time consuming, even for those with strong keyboard skills. However, it is important to note that the success to date has been the result of a fortuitous mix of community field practitioners with a blend of interests and experience, the involvement of key players at both national and regional headquarters, and an uncompromising desire to introduce a product to meet the needs of everyone affected.

We would be wise to continue to follow this formula in the future.

(1) Craig Townson, Area Director, Western Ontario District N6A 3E3.

(2) L.L. Motiuk and S.L. Brown, *The Validity of Offender Needs Identification and Analysis in Community Corrections* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1993), Report 34.