

Learning to better predict the future: National Parole Board risk-assessment training

Social scientists continually strive to perfect their ability to predict future criminal behaviour. Perfection has not yet been achieved, but a growing body of research and literature is increasing the reliability of such predictions.

This research has been greatly advanced by meta-analytic reviews of controlled outcome studies. These systematic quantitative reviews have increased our knowledge of the effectiveness of various treatments and controls in reducing recidivism. In other words, some statistical evidence now points to "what works" in preventing the recurrence of an offender's criminal behaviour.

This article describes how these advances in predicting criminal behaviour were translated into a comprehensive three-day National Parole Board risk-assessment training course. The course was presented by various teams of academics and practitioners to all full-time and part-time Board members (and Board operational staff) in each regional office across the country during the 1993-1994 fiscal year. What is the National Parole Board? The National Parole Board, like the Correctional Service of Canada, is an agency of the Ministry of the Solicitor General of Canada. The Board is an administrative tribunal with the exclusive authority to grant or deny parole, to terminate or revoke parole and statutory release, and to detain offenders eligible for statutory release. In 1992-1993, the Board made 34,555 conditional release decisions.

The Board also makes decisions on whether to issue, grant, deny or revoke pardons under the *Criminal Records Act* and can also make clemency recommendations to Parliament. In 1992-1993, the Board processed 25,249 pardon cases.

The Board has authority over the parole and statutory release processes for offenders in federal and territorial institutions and offenders in provincial institutions (which normally house offenders serving sentences of less than two years) - except in Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia, which maintain their own provincial parole boards.

The Correctional Service of Canada is responsible for administering offender sentences of two years or longer. This responsibility includes the management of correctional institutions and the supervision of offenders in the community. The National Parole Board relies on the Service to prepare reports and recommendations on the cases that come before the Board and to ensure that release conditions set by the Board are met. The first step: Cooperation In early 1993, the National Parole Board began discussions with the director of the Correctional Service of Canada's Research and Statistics Branch about the possibility of bringing the recent developments in research on predicting criminal behaviour together into a training package. The consultations quickly expanded to include regional representatives from the National Parole Board and the Correctional Service of Canada, as well as various Canadian academics and representatives from the Ministry Secretariat.

Only through the extensive cooperative efforts of these partners was the Board able to deliver the first stage of this comprehensive training package during the 1993-1994 fiscal year. Further, the experts in criminal justice research actually delivered the training and their personal knowledge and experience

added enormously to its effectiveness. An overview of National Parole Board training The National Parole Board is a citizen's board, which represents and serves the community. Board members bring diverse backgrounds, skills, experiences and knowledge to the challenge of conditional release decision making. To support its members in meeting this challenge, the Board provides them with continual training on all aspects of the decision-making process, risk assessment and risk management.

After two initial orientation sessions, there is an assessment to identify further training needs and the action that will assist in the member's further development. Board members require continual training and development to keep abreast of changes in law, policies and procedures, of new information on risk assessment and management, and to generally improve performance.

The Board also involves its members in periodic team projects, planning sessions, and a range of formal and informal learning opportunities. Risk-assessment training Board members must be aware of, and understand, the most recent behavioural science research on criminal behaviour and risk assessment, as risk assessment is central to the Board's decision making.

More specifically, the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* requires the Board to distinguish different types of offenders and their risk. The Act's accelerated review and detention provisions require decision makers to specifically assess whether an offender may commit a violent offence after release. Therefore, Board members need to be aware of the tools and research available to support an assessment that an offender is at risk of **violent** reoffending.

The risk-assessment training package focused, therefore, on how current research, theory and opinion in the human and social sciences can assist in National Parole Board decision making relating to risk management and risk reduction. The overall objective was to provide cohesive and basic information about risk assessment, risk prediction and risk management based on current theory, research results and practical experience.

The training package consisted of seven sessions. The first session examined theories of criminal behaviour that have influenced (and still do) correctional policy and the assessment of criminal behaviour.⁽²⁾ The second session identified specific correlates, predictors and cues of criminal behaviour and defined how they relate to risk assessment.⁽³⁾ This session also discussed certain risk-assessment procedures that aid decision making. The third session examined the results of research on the effects of incarceration and of interventions or lack of interventions during incarceration.⁽⁴⁾ The next three sessions looked at the identification of risk factors and at risk-assessment and management issues for specific groups of offenders.⁽⁵⁾ The final session drew on the information covered in the previous sessions and demonstrated how the same elements are relevant to continual reexamination of risk while offenders are serving part of their sentence in the community.⁽⁶⁾ General approach The training was heavily influenced by a general social-psychological perspective on criminal conduct. Four basic assumptions of this approach were defined during the opening session:

- Criminal behaviour is, for the most part, learned behaviour.
- The learning of criminal behaviour follows the same principles as the learning of any other

behaviour.

- The major principles of learning are those identified in the laboratories.
- Behaviour results from the interaction of environmental factors (rewards and penalties for behaviour) and personal factors.

Much of the material shared during the three days of training built on these principles. Further, research has demonstrated that predicting future criminal behaviour is difficult. Therefore, to make the most reliable predictions, decision makers must be able to conduct assessments of five key areas of an offender's situation:

- behavioural history;
- the immediate situation;
- mental and emotional outlook favourable to criminal activity;
- pro-criminal social supports; and e other personal factors, including level of development, self regulation, problem-solving skills, impulsivity and callousness.

In a nutshell, the general approach is that many conditions shape and support criminal behaviour, 50 comprehensive assessments of offenders are required.

Further, while past behaviour can still be linked to probable future conduct, this is a static factor that does not change. If the system hopes to change offenders, it needs to target factors that are good candidates for change. Research has identified various dynamic risk factors that, if treated successfully, can reduce recidivism. Specific treatment must, therefore, be tailored to the individual offender, targeting the offender's particular problems, and the offender must be monitored systematically to reveal any changes in his or her level of risk.

However, this does not imply that risk/need assessments and knowledge of program participation can yield perfect predictions of recidivism. The training also reinforced the awareness that even the best predictors are empirical generalizations yielding less than perfect results. The training instructors, therefore, also focused on professional judgment, repeatedly emphasizing the need for accurate, timely information gathered from many collateral sources. The instructors emphasized that decision makers have a responsibility to look critically at all information, to question the quality of all analyses, and to consider any potential bias. While research and expert opinion clearly aid in the decision-making process, neither can replace the independent and professional exercise of judgment. Where do we go from here? No single training session or package of materials can or should be considered sufficient. This course simply could not cover every issue or question that might arise in the practice of risk assessment. The course did, however, provide a reasonable and consistent base of knowledge that Board members can use. The information and principles covered by these risk-assessment training sessions will also be further developed through future training.

To that end, the risk-assessment training package is being incorporated into the Board's orientation training, and workshops are being developed to apply the principles and theories of risk assessment to case reviews. The Board Member Training and Development Division is also working with various

academics and practitioners to develop further sessions on risk assessment for special offender groups, and the Board is attempting to determine how the hearing process can be most effectively used as a risk-assessment tool.

It is clear that the risk-assessment training course has set the tone and direction for ongoing professional development. This type of training, building on a strong interdisciplinary research base, can only enhance the Board's professionalism in carrying out its legislative responsibilities.

(1) National Parole Board, 911-340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0R1.

(2) J. Bonta, National Parole Board risk-assessment training course, Session I: "Explanation of criminality."

(3) L.L. Motiuk, National Parole Board risk-assessment training course, Session II: "Prediction and classification."

(4) D. Andrews, National Parole Board risk-assessment training course, Session III: "Impact of incarceration and intervention."

(5) T. Leis, T. Nicholaichuk and R. Menzies, National Parole Board risk-assessment training course, Session IV: "Management and treatment of offenders with mental health problems"; S. Williams and S. Swanson, National Parole Board risk-assessment training course, Session V: "Management and treatment of sex offenders"; J. Ogloff, National Parole Board risk-assessment training course, Session VI: "Prediction of violent reoffending."

(6) D. Andrews, National Parole Board risk-assessment training course, Session VII: "Supervision/management aspects of conditional release."