

Using familial factors to assess offender risk and need

Understanding the nature and level of criminal risk factors can facilitate the construction of practical and effective risk/need assessment instruments. Further, it is commonly believed that properly identified dynamic risk factors (such as an offender's family relations) can provide promising targets for correctional intervention and, when treatment is successful, lead to reduced recidivism.

Factors such as criminality within the family and familial problems (such as low levels of affection/caring/cohesiveness, poor parental supervision and discipline, and outright neglect and abuse) **can** be categorized as major risk/need factors.⁽²⁾ In other words, offenders with these family background variables are at much greater risk of re-offending than offenders coming from families without these characteristics.

This article highlights several illustrations of the predictive value of familial factors in assessing offender risk and need, and ultimately examines the practical implications for correctional assessment, programming and management.

Predictive value

In exploring the predictive validity of familial variables,⁽³⁾ assessment information was obtained from the Level of Supervision Inventory an objective risk/need classification instrument that was administered to 510 consecutive male offenders on admission to the Ontario provincial correctional system.⁽⁴⁾

A series of correlational analyses were conducted between the four family variables assessed and selected prison and post-release adjustment measures. The majority of the family variables were found to be significantly associated with prison misconduct, return to prison and parole violation (see Table 1).

Table 1

The Predictive Validity of Familial Factors Assessed by the Level of Supervision Inventory (510 offenders)				
Family variable	Offenders identified	Prison misconduct (510)	Return to Prison (510)	Parole violation (170)
Dissatisfaction with marital (or equivalent) situation	48.8%	.10*	.10**	.24**
Non-rewarding relationship with parent(s)	50.8%	.21***	.10*	.18*
Non-rewarding relationship with other(s)	44.1%	.14**	.09*	.18*
Criminal family/spouse	21.6%	.10*	.09*	.09

Note:*=p<.05; **=p<.01; ***=p<.001.

Further, while family predictors may individually have relatively weak relationships with future outcomes, better predictions can be made when they are examined as composites.

A similar study⁽⁵⁾ explored variations in family background composites (such as all the family variable scores added together) in relation to post-release behaviour and found significant relationships with halfway house failure ($r = .32, p < .01$) and offender re-incarceration ($r = .46, p < .001$).

The Community Risk/Needs Management Scale

To comply with its standards for conditional release supervision, the Correctional Service of Canada must systematically assess the needs of offenders, their risk of re-offending and any other factors that might affect their successful reintegration into the community.

As a result, the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale was designed, developed and implemented.

Today, parole officers use the scale to capture case-specific information on criminal history and offender needs to classify federal offenders on conditional release. One of the 12 separate need areas covered by the scale is *marital/family relationships*.

Table 2

Marital/Family Relationships Rating and Conditional Release Failure	
Marital/family relationships rating	Conditional release failure rate
Factor seen as an asset to community adjustment	8.0%
No immediate need for improvement	19.8%
Some need for improvement	35.9%
Considerable need for improvement	40.9%

Each need area is individually rated according to specific guidelines. For *marital family relationships*, an offender rating of "factor is seen as an asset to community adjustment" means there is evidence of very positive relationships and considerable support from parents, relatives or a spouse.

"No immediate need for improvement" signifies evidence of a satisfying and caring relationship within a marriage and/or family that has resulted in no current supervision difficulties, while "some need for improvement" identifies evidence of lack of care, hostility, arguments, fighting or indifference in the

marital/family relationship(s) that results in occasional offender instability.

Finally, a rating of "considerable need for improvement" is given if any of the listed problems have caused a very unstable pattern of marital/family relationships.

Field research conducted on the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale has found that parole officers can easily identify the nature and level of *marital family relationships* risk/need presented by an offender (33.2% of sample was identified as "needy" in this area) and this assessment was consistently related with suspension ($r = .27, p < .001$) and revocation ($r = .23, p < .001$) of conditional release.⁽⁶⁾

In fact, a consistent pattern emerged when looking at the percentage distribution of conditional release failures (suspensions). The greater the offender need rating on this variable, the more likely the offender was to fail on conditional release (see Table 2).

Familial indicators and conditional release failure

During 1992-1993, an Ontario region working group designed, developed and implemented an enhanced approach to assessing an offender's risk and need level while on conditional release.⁽⁷⁾ Initial data on this community risk/need assessment process was obtained from a sample of 573 federal male offenders released from federal institutions in the Ontario region over a six-month period.

These offenders showed variability in the *marital family relations* domain (43.5% of the sample was identified as "needy" in this area) and this assessment was again related to suspension of conditional release.

The percentage distribution of conditional release failures (suspensions) associated with each indicator in the *marital family relations* domain revealed considerable variation among the familial factors and a number of statistically significant relationships with conditional release failure (see Table 3).

Table 3

Familial Indicators and Conditional Release Failure			
Marital/family relations indicators	Offenders identified	Conditional release suspension of identified offenders	r
Physical/sexual abuse as a child	26.8%	26.1%	0.07
Problems in common-law relationship/marriage	42.0%	25.0%	0.12*
Perpetrator of spousal abuse	13.6%	33.9%	0.13*
Victim of spousal abuse	4.4%	27.3%	0.04
In trouble as a result of child abuse	7.9%	10.5%	-0.07
Ineffective as a parent	11.9%	21.7%	0.04
Poor family functioning	34.3%	26.9%	0.12*

Widening the sampling domain...

The Service's recent Correctional Strategy Initiative determined that criminogenic needs should be the basis for offender programming and that service delivery should focus primarily on successful offender reintegration into the community. As a result, the Service developed a systematic approach to offender assessment on admission to the federal correctional system. The goal was to standardize an integrated offender risk and need assessment process throughout the Correctional Service of Canada.

The Offender Intake Assessment process is a comprehensive and integrated evaluation of the offender at the time of admission to the federal correctional system. The process involves collection and analysis of information on the offender's criminal and mental health history, social situation, education and other factors relevant to identifying criminal risk and offender need. The results provide a basis for determining the offender's institutional placement and for establishing his or her correctional plan.

The process was piloted in all Service regions in 1992-1993. Data obtained from this trial yielded important information on familial factors. At admission, about two thirds of the pilot sample were identified as "needy" in the area of marital/family relations. As expected, a composite of the familial indicators was significantly associated with level of need ($r = .44, p < .0001$). A detailed summary of the distribution of family background variables (offenders were identified on an average of 7.4 of the 31 possible indicators) was obtained for 103 federal offenders (see Table 4).

Table 4

A breakdown of Familial Indicators as Assessed by the Offender Intake Assessment Process (103 Offenders)	
Familial Indicators	Offenders Identified
Childhood lacked family ties	34.3%
Mother absent during childhood	13.3%
Maternal relations negative as a child	23.5%
Father absent during childhood	36.3%
Paternal relations negative as a child	44.4%
Parents' relationship dysfunctional during childhood	55.6%
Spousal abuse during childhood	36.9%
Sibling relations negative during childhood	15.5%
Other relative(s) relations negative during childhood	15.1%
Family members involved in crime	48.5%
Currently single	64.1%
Has been married/common law in the past	76.2%

Dissatisfied with current relationship	32.9%
• Money problems affect relationship(s) past/present	51.2%
• Sexual problems affect relationship(s) past/present	10.3%
• Communication problems affect the relationship(s)	36.6%
• Has been a victim of spousal abuse	14.3%
• Has been a perpetrator of spousal abuse	21.7%
Has no parenting responsibilities	43.6%
• Unable to handle parenting responsibilities	26.6%
• Unable to control the child's behaviour	19.5%
• Perceives self as unable to control the child's behaviour	2.6%
• Supervises child improperly	14.6%
• Does not participate in activities with the child	11.9%
• Lacks an understanding of child development	20.0%
• Family is unable to get along as a unit	42.9%
• Has been arrested for child abuse	4.2%
• Has been arrested for incest	3.1%
Prior marital/family assessment(s)	16.9%
Has participated in marital/family therapy	15.6%
Has completed a marital/family intervention program	11.6%

Another step along the road...

Sound risk-management principles require the continual evaluation of correctional activities related to public, staff and offender safety. Among other supports to this type of evaluation, the Service has developed a computerized means of monitoring the nature and level of familial factors identified for the entire institutional and conditional release population through the Offender Management System.

National, regional, institutional and field office overviews of the family background characteristics of the offender population at intake and/or on conditional release can be generated and thereby equip correctional administrators and planners with valuable risk-management information.

The ability to produce a family background profile of an entire offender population can raise awareness about institutional and community supervision populations, provide basic statistics on risk/need levels and aid in estimating resource requirements by identifying the level of service required for particular populations.

This ability to monitor the risk levels of its admission and conditional release population has moved the Service further toward the delivery of an effective and well-integrated risk-management program.

(1) Correctional Research and Development, Correctional Service of Canada, Second Floor, 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9.

(2) D. A. Andrews and I. Bonta, *Psychology of Criminal Conduct* (Cincinnati: Anderson, 1994).

- (3)L. L. Motiuk, *Antecedents and Consequences of Prison Adjustment: A Systematic Assessment and Re-assessment Approach*, Ph.D. dissertation, Carleton University, 1991.
- (4)D. A. Andrews, *The Level of Supervision Inventory (LSI)* (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Correctional Services, 1982).
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- (6)L. L. Motiuk and F. J. Porporino, *Field Test of the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale: A Study of Offenders on Caseload* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1989).
- (7)C. Townson, "An Improved Risk-assessment Process: Ontario Region's Community Offender Management Strategy," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 6, 3 (1994):17-19.