

## Follow-up of offenders from the Vancouver District Violent Offender Program

*In early 1996, the Research Branch of the Correctional Service of Canada conducted a follow-up study of offenders from the Vancouver District Violent Offender Unit, a pilot program for managing violent offenders under supervision in the community. The Violent Offender Unit (VOU) was established in early 1994 to provide an intensive community supervision program for persistently violent offenders.*

### Methods and data

#### *Study parameters*

Our follow-up period was restricted to the first six months following program admission (as determined by the date of data capture) as this was the minimum time we could examine while still including all the offenders. However, some of the earliest program entrants had been under supervision for nearly two years by this point.

While most conditional release failures occur within six months of release, previous research has found that a significant proportion of offenders fail after a longer interval.<sup>2</sup>

The study considered all offenders (73) who entered the program from January 1994, the start of the program: 34 entered in calendar year 1994, 38 during 1995, one joined originally in 1994 and returned after an initial failure for a second chance, and three entered early in January 1996 but have been counted with the 1995 group. The list of participants was cut in January 1996 to allow for a minimum six-month follow-up period. The breakdown by program entry period is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

<b>Breakdown of Program Entry Period</b>		
<b>Program Entry Period</b>	<b>Total Program Entires</b>	<b>Distribution of Program Entires (%)</b>
1994	34	46
1995	40	54
Total to date:	74*	100

Note: \* the 74 entires include one offender who was admitted into the program twice in successive years

The readmission data for the follow-up analysis were collected in August 1996. By this date, at least six months had passed for all offenders since their release date, and 46% of participants had also reached their one-year release anniversary date.

#### *Data collection*

The list of program participants was provided by Pacific region staff and was used to assemble offender profile and recidivism information from the Correctional Service of Canada's Offender Management System (OMS), as well as criminal history information from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) criminal history system.<sup>3</sup>

Program failures were defined to include revocations and suspensions during the program participation period. All failures were dated and classified. Readmission dates were verified as having all occurred after the initial entry into the VOU program. Failures were also classified as to type (both with and without a conviction for a new offence).

This study examined failures within six months (and, for a subsample, within one year) after release. Comparisons are made with other benchmark populations (offenders released after participating in a Pacific region high risk, violent offender, institutional program and a matching control group of non-treated offenders).

### Profile of offenders in the VOU

The VOU program was designed to provide intensive community supervision (at least two therapeutic sessions per week) for high risk, violent offenders.

The Correctional Service of Canada should target intensive correctional programming (whether institution- or community-based) toward offenders who are identified as having the highest risk/needs. High risk, violent offenders can be identified by several criteria, such as the current "major offence"; the offender's criminal history, where it involves numerous convictions or convictions for serious violent offences; and actuarial risk assessment tools (for example, the Statistical Information on Recidivism, or SIR, Scale scores).

### *Convictions for violent offences*

In a parallel study of an institutional treatment program for violent offenders, Motiuk and his colleagues examined the current offence and SIR Scale scores for their program's high risk participants (the violent offence categories used were homicide, sex offence, robbery and assault crimes).<sup>4</sup> We show a comparable breakdown for the VOU participants by violent crime type and risk level, as determined by their SIR Scale score in Table 2.

**Table 2**

<b>Vancouver Violent Offender Program Participants</b>					
	<b>Risk Level *(%)</b>				
	<b>Very Poor</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Fair</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Very Good</b>

Offence type (n)	20	13	7	0	60
Murder (15)	0	22	33	22	22
Manslaughter (9)	38	29	25	4	4
Robbery (23)	38	29	25	4	4
Assault (19)	42	5	26	11	16
Other offences (3)	33	0	0	33	33
Note: * risk is derived from the offender's SIR Scale score					

Offender records show that one third of offenders (34%) were serving a sentence for a current major offence of homicide (21% for murder, 13% for manslaughter), about one third for robbery (34%), about one quarter for assault (27%) and the remaining 4% for a non-violent offence. Overall, about 95% of the offenders were currently serving a sentence for a violent offence, typically homicide or robbery. Moreover, almost half of the VOU participants (47%) were classified as "poor" or "very poor" risk.

This pattern was reinforced when we examined the participants' criminal history. As shown in Table 3, we found that, collectively, these offenders had accumulated over 1,300 convictions, of which 222 were for violent offences.

**Table 3**

<b>Criminal History of Participants</b>	
<b>Cumulative Totals of Convictions for all Participants*</b>	<b>Number</b>
Homicide	30
Murder	18
Manslaughter	12
Robbery	103
Sexual offences	2
Assault	87
Total convictions for violence	222
Total all violent and non violent convictions	1,363
Offender with any violent conviction	67
Note: * criminal history records were available for 70 -73 offenders	

Over 95% of offenders (67 offenders out of 70 for whom we found records) in the VOU program had at least one conviction for a violent crime. RCMP criminal conviction files also show that VOU participants had convictions for 30 homicides, and had a total of 103 robbery and 87 assault convictions.

In addition, there is considerable evidence of previous supervision, bail or other failures. Two thirds of participants (46) had convictions for previous misconduct, including breach of condition or bail (29), failure to appear (22), unlawfully at large (20) or escape (18). Collectively, they had amassed a total of

190 such convictions.

These data provide strong evidence that participants in the VOU program are offenders with extensive history of violent and/or other high risk behaviour.

### *Current federal term*

The number of convictions for previous misconduct reflects a population with extensive prior involvement with the courts and with corrections. The inmates in this study were serving anywhere from their first to seventh federal term, with the great majority (93%) on their first to third federal term. Almost half (47.9%) were serving a first federal term, and another third (33.8%) were on their second federal term.

### Postrelease outcomes

As shown in Table 4, just 13 (18%) of the participants in the VOU program had experienced a failure within one year following their release. This rate does not control for the different lengths of time that participants had been under supervision.

---

**Table 4**

<b>Total Failures within One Year of Release</b>		
	<b>Frequency (%)</b>	
Not failed	61	82.5
Failed	13	17.5
Total*	74	100
Note: * includes one participant who entered twice		

### *Failure rates during first six months*

When the potential time spent in the community is equalized to a standard first six months while under supervision (see Table 5), we find that the failure rate was about 15% (11 failures). Looking at each program group separately, according to when they entered the program, we find that the failure rate for each program entry period varied from a high of 30% to a low of 5%, and there were no failures for the three participants who entered in January 1996.

---

**Table 5**

<b>Failures during First Six-month Period (as of August 1996)</b>

<b>Program Entry Period</b>	<b>Number Entering</b>	<b>Proportion Entering(%)</b>	<b>Number of Failures</b>	<b>Proportion of Failures(%)</b>
January-June 1994	24	32	4	17
July-December 1994	10	14	3	30
January-June 1995	21	28	3	5
July-December 1995	19	26	1	5
Total to date	74*	100	11	15
Note: * includes one participant who entered twice				

The Offender Management System records for the 11 readmissions indicate that 10 were revocations of release and 1 was an interruption of release. All 10 of the revocations are indicated as occurring **without the commission of a new offence**.

### *Comparative failure rates*

Using an appropriate benchmark makes an evaluation of these failure rates more meaningful. A recent study<sup>5</sup> examined failure rates for offenders who completed an intensive treatment program for violent male offenders at the Regional Health Centre (RHC-Pacific region), 60 of whom had been released and were followed up. This study also had a control population (a matched sample of male, non-treatment releases).<sup>6</sup>

Within the follow-up period of six months after release, the failure rates for the VOU, community, high risk, violent offenders and the male, matched, non-treatment releases were identical (15%). The failure rate for the RHC-Pacific treatment group was only slightly higher (17%). These results are shown in Table 6.

**Table 6**

<b>Offenders Readmitted within Six Months-Three High Risk Populations</b>			
<b>Program</b>	<b>Eligible Number</b>	<b>Failures</b>	<b>Proportion of Failures (%)</b>
VOU (Pacific) intensive community supervision group	74	11	15
RHC-Pacific intensive institutional treatment group	44	9	17
Pacific male, matched, non-treatment, release group	45	8	15

### *Low risk and outcome*

This study reconfirms that risk assessments (based mainly on criminal history) can predict postrelease recidivism. There were no failures among the participants who had been assessed (as based on the SIR Scale score) as "good" or "very good" risks, within the six-month period following release. Of the 11 failures, 7 (64%) had been rated as either "very poor" or "poor" risk, and the other 4 (36%) were rated as "fair" risks. The fact that no failures were indicated which involved a new offence suggests that intensive supervision and community programming can provide an effective means for reducing public risk in the community.

## Summary

First, both the RHC-Pacific, high intensity, institutional program and the VOU, high intensity, community-supervision program are being targeted, in the main, to high risk offenders (as stipulated by the risk principle).<sup>7</sup>

Second, both high intensity treatment programs (albeit one institutional and the other community) are achieving some measurable success. The failure rates for the two high risk treatment groups are comparable to that of the non-treated release group. Among RHC-Pacific group members, there were no revocations for a new offence, and no VOU participants were readmitted with a new offence.

Finally, this investigation points out potential avenues for further research. The relationship between high intensity programs in institutions and programs in the community needs to be more closely examined, to see how benefits from specialized institutional programs can be reinforced in the community. In this study, only six of the RHC-Pacific participants were found to have also participated in the VOU community program. Additionally, the implementation of the Correctional Service of Canada's new intake assessment system will assist in relating offenders' needs to correctional programming. We anticipate this should produce significant gains in offender risk management.

---

1. Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9.

2. T. Nouwens, L.L. Motiuk and R. Boe, "So You Want To Know the Recidivism Rate?" *Forum on Corrections Research*, 5, 3 (1993). From our other research, it appears that about 60% of release failures occur within six months of the release date and 90% of failures occur within one year.

3. This latter information is particularly important since it shows violent criminal convictions that may have been served under provincial or youth jurisdiction.

4. L. Motiuk, C. Smiley and K. Blanchette, "Intensive Programming for Violent Offenders: A Comparative Investigation," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 8, 3 (1996).

5. Motiuk, Smiley and Blanchette, "Intensive Programming for Violent Offenders."

6. Motiuk, Smiley and Blanchette, "Intensive Programming for Violent Offenders." This specialized program emphasizes a cognitive-behavioural and psychosocial approach to changing the antisocial behaviour of offenders. The program lasts for about eight months. The control group was a similarly situated group of male offenders matched on release date, age at release date and sentence length. One of the authors, Kelley Blanchette, was able to provide a special run for us to make these comparisons at the six-month release point.

7. D.A. Andrews, "Recidivism Is Predictable and Can Be Influenced: Using Risk Assessments to Reduce Recidivism," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 1, 2 (1989). As Andrews notes, "...the risk principle suggests that higher levels of service should be allocated to higher risk cases."