Offender risk/needs assessment: A study of conditional releases (R-01, 1989)

The researchers take into consideration that predictor instruments used for assessing "risk" are static in nature and cannot be responsive to differential management strategies. Consequently, if risk scores are to be used to determine levels of supervision, then the problem of changing levels of supervision over time becomes clear. They rationalize that, as validity need areas are addressed, the relative risk the offender represents will be reduced and less supervision and contact will be required to manage that offender effectively in the community. They hypothesize that if a meaningful and significant relationship could be shown between identified needs and conditional release outcomes, then a combined risk/needs assessment procedure may be useful for differentiating offenders under community supervision.

This study examines the potential for an offender risk/needs assessment process in establishing guidelines or standards for varying levels of supervision on conditional release.

As a preliminary investigation, the study examined three areas. First, it re-examined the predictive validity of a traditional risk assessment procedure, separately for parole and mandatory supervision samples. Second, it attempted to identify some of the major needs characteristics of those offenders who succeed or fail while under conditional release. Third, it looked at how a combination of risk and needs assessment might yield improved predictions of release outcome.

The automated Offender Information Service was used to identify and draw the sample selection from offenders on conditional release who either successfully completed their parole or mandatory supervision between January 1 and December 31,1985, or had their parole or mandatory supervision revoked during that same period. Approximately 4,523 cases were identified across Canada.

In generating the final sample, all five Correctional Service of Canada regions would have equal representation. Within each region, male offenders would be classified into one of four groups:

- those who reached their warrant expiry date while on parole;
- those who were revoked while on parole;
- those who reached their warrant expiry date while on mandatory supervision; and
- those who were revoked while on mandatory supervision.

This resulted in a randomly stratified sample of approximately 600 cases, 150 cases per conditional release grouping.

Due to inaccessible files and the elimination of samples that did not meet the criteria, a total of 221 cases - 103 offenders who were on parole and 118 who were on mandatory supervision - remained at this stage of the sampling process.

The data gathering came from the community case management files of each case. A structured information coding schedule was developed to gather relevant data in 12 general areas: demographics,

juvenile history, index offence(s), offence dynamics, socio-economic and psychological background, institutional adjustment, prerelease performance, release data, community supervision performance, final outcome data, original offence(s) and prior criminal history.

The findings of the study, in brief, suggest that while needs level appears to show ample variation within risk level categories, the overwhelming consideration would be whether there are combinations of risk/needs levels which yield improved release predictions. The findings further suggest that a risk/needs instrument may be particularly useful for the differential allocation of controls and services to higher risk cases on conditional release.

In general, the results of the study indicate that offender risk/needs assessments may have some practical utility for community case managers and suggest that further development and refinement of a risk/needs assessment tool would be a worthwhile pursuit in light of its potential relevance to conditional release outcomes.