

Offender needs — Providing the focus for our correctional interventions

by **Gilbert Taylor**¹

Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada

Corrections is concerned with reducing the incidence of criminal behaviour. Most incarcerated offenders eventually return to the community. It is the primary function of every correctional agency to administer the offender's sentence in a manner that does the most to ensure the offender does not become involved in criminal activity again and is prepared for return to society as a law-abiding citizen at the earliest possible opportunity. As is clearly enunciated in the Mission of the Correctional Service of Canada,² this involves the two major themes of assisting offenders and controlling their behaviour.

Correctional agencies make many important management decisions during the course of an offender's sentence, including initial and revised custody level, institutional placement and transfers, assignment to rehabilitative programs, type and intensity of supervision, consideration for conditional release or extended incarceration, and return to custody after release. All of these decisions can be related to the themes of assistance and control, and all should involve a comprehensive assessment of the nature and level of risk the individual offender presents.

This article examines the importance of evaluating offender needs as part of the overall assessment of risk. Information obtained from this needs assessment is critical, both for making the sentence management decisions described above, and for providing the focus for our correctional interventions.

Why assess offender needs?

To answer this question adequately it is useful to review four principles of offender classification for correctional management and treatment as advanced by Andrews and Bonta.³

1. **Risk Principle:** Higher-risk cases benefit from intensive intervention; lower-risk cases benefit most from low (or no) levels of service.
2. **Need Principle:** We can achieve the greatest reductions in recidivism by targeting criminogenic needs⁴ for treatment and supervision.
3. **Responsivity Principle:** Our treatment programs and supervision approaches will be most effective when geared to the offender's own abilities and learning style.

4. **Principle of Professional Discretion:** Careful use of professional judgment and discretion can improve the structured assessment and management of risk.

Risk principle

Research has clearly demonstrated that we can distinguish between offenders according to the level of risk each presents, that higher-risk offenders reoffend more often than lower-risk offenders, and that the risk principle does work in practice. For example, a recent meta-analysis of 400 research studies on the effectiveness of treatment with juvenile offenders found greater reductions in reoffending when higher-risk offenders were treated than was the case for lower-risk offenders; similar results were found with another meta-analysis using a sample of 294 tests and treatments.⁵

Need principle

There is convincing evidence to support the need principle as well. Research conducted by the Correctional Service of Canada revealed that offenders with criminogenic needs are significantly more likely to fail on conditional release⁶ and that assessments of offender risk and needs were good predictors of outcome on parole.⁷ Using an actuarial instrument, the Level of Supervision Inventory (LSI) to assess criminogenic needs, Andrews and Robinson⁸ discovered that the LSI scores changed over time and that the changes were related to changes in recidivism. Other researchers⁹ have found that assessing a variety of static and dynamic risk factors using actuarial methods, providing more intensive levels of treatment to higher-risk offenders, and targeting criminogenic needs in a manner consistent with the characteristics of the offender results in considerably reduced rates of recidivism.

The combined assessment of risk associated with criminal history and need levels of offenders actually increases the predictive power of the risk assessment. In a 1993 study

conducted by Motiuk and Brown,¹⁰ high-risk/high-need offenders were four times as likely to fail on conditional release as were low-risk/low-need offenders.

We must not underestimate the contribution that offender needs assessments make to the overall assessment and management of risk. In a recent follow-up to their 1996 review of the Service's day parole program, Grant and Gillis¹¹ confirmed that an increase in either risk or need levels was closely associated with an increase in failure rates (see Table 1). However, they noted one exception: offenders who were assessed as low-risk/high-need had higher re-admission and reoffending rates than offenders assessed as high-risk/low-need. What is more, the rate for reoffending with violence was higher for the low-risk/high-need group. For these cases, need level was more important than risk level in predicting day parole outcome using several measures of failure.

Research also supports the utility of distinguishing between criminogenic and non-criminogenic needs. In a recent meta-analysis, Dowden¹⁴ provided an in-depth examination of the need principle. Analyses focused on the "more promising" (criminogenic) and "less promising" (non-criminogenic) targets for change identified by Andrews and Bonta.¹⁵

Tables 2 and 3 present the results for each of the individual criminogenic and non-criminogenic need targets. Dowden reported that each of the non-criminogenic needs was either not related to, or was negatively associated with, reductions in recidivism. Each of the criminogenic needs, on the other hand, was positively correlated with reduced recidivism. More important, 75% of the individual criminogenic need targets produced significant reductions in recidivism.

An overall test of the need principle was also completed. Dowden reported that programs that appropriately addressed the need principle

were associated with significantly higher mean effect sizes ($r = .19$, $k=169$) than programs that did not ($r = -.01$, $k = 205$). These findings suggest that correctional treatment programs that seek to reduce recidivism should target appropriate criminogenic needs.

To summarize, research both within and outside the Service has shown that:

- factors related to an offender's criminal history (static risk factors) are strongly related to failure on conditional release;
- there is a consistent relationship between the number and type of offender criminogenic needs (dynamic risk factors) and recidivism; and
- the assessment of **both** static and dynamic risk greatly improves our ability to predict which offenders will reoffend.

Table 1

Day Parole Outcome According to Risk/Need Levels

Risk/Need (offenders)	Type of Day Parole Outcome ¹				
	Number of cases	Re-admission	Technical violations	New offence	Violent offence
Low/Low	82	4.88%	4.88%	3.66%	3.66%
Low/Medium	102	11.76%	1.96%	8.91%	.98%
Low/High	14	28.57%	7.14%	21.43%	7.14%
High/Low	21	14.29%	14.29%	14.29%	4.76%
High/Medium	71	26.76%	9.86%	18.31%	4.23%
High/High	49	36.73%	20.41%	20.41%	4.08%
Chi-squared values (N = 339)		29.22 $p < .001$	17.94 $p < .01$	13.43 $p < .05$	NS

¹ The outcome groups are not mutually exclusive; an offender can be represented in more than one group.

There is other evidence of the relative importance of needs assessment. Comparing violent and non-violent female offenders according to their risk/need levels, Blanchette¹² discovered that violent women were assessed as having higher need levels than non-violent women; surprisingly, differences associated with static risk factors were minor. In another study,¹³ Blanchette found clear gender differences in community-supervised offenders based on level and nature of offender needs.

Table 2

Criminogenic Needs Targeted: Rank Ordered by Frequency and Their Correlation with Recidivism Reduction

Targeted Need	Frequency	<i>r</i>
Academic	72	.21**
Anger/antisocial feelings	62	.32**
Other needs	61	.30**
Self-control	59	.33**
Pro-social model	40	.26**
Antisocial attitudes	37	.23**
Vocational skills	32	.04
Family: affection	24	.29**
Information: Substance abuse	22	.08
Substance abuse treatment	21	.03
Reduce antisocial peers	19	.11*
Relapse prevention	18	.16**
Family: Supervision	17	.31**
Barriers to treatment	12	.27**
Vocational skills + job	12	.24**
Mentally disordered: Medication	2	.01
Attitudes toward substances	0	–
Child protection	0	–
Mentally disordered: Shelter	0	–

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Source: C. Dowden, reference #14

Table 3

Non-Criminogenic Needs Targeted: Rank Ordered by Frequency and Their Correlation with Recidivism Reduction

Targeted Need	Frequency	<i>r</i>
Vague/emotional personal problems	90	-.04
Physical activity	43	.00
Fear of official punishment	41	-.25**
Increase conventional ambition	29	.00
Family: Other interventions	26	-.09
Increase cohesive antisocial peers	20	-.09
Increase self-esteem	15	-.08
Accepts criminal thinking	7	-.04
Improved living conditions	0	–

** $p < .01$

Source: C. Dowden, reference #14

Clearly, accurate assessment of the offender's criminogenic needs makes a valuable contribution to the overall assessment of risk. Offender needs are dynamic risk factors that can be targeted for correctional intervention and regularly reassessed.

Responsivity principle

Once we have appropriately targeted the offender's criminogenic need areas and have identified a level of service that corresponds to the assessment of risk, we should consider the mode and style of service that is best suited to the individual offender. Generally, programs that have proven to be the most effective have focused on cognitive behaviour and social learning. Andrews and Bonta¹⁶ report on studies that demonstrate the differential effectiveness of rehabilitation programs depending on the nature of the treatment provided and the characteristics of the offenders involved. They also point out that, while there is a growing body of research in this area, further study is warranted.

In 1986, the Service implemented Case Management Strategies, a structured procedure for establishing offender supervision requirements that respects the responsivity principle. Originally developed in 1975 by the Wisconsin Bureau of Community Corrections (and also known as the Client Management Classification System¹⁷), this approach helps Service staff develop effective supervision strategies based on specific offender types. The determination of strategy group is completed automatically based on comprehensive information contained in the Offender Intake Assessment (see later for discussion of the OIA).

Principle of professional discretion

The three preceding principles for correctional treatment demonstrate the value of objective approaches to offender assessment. In fact, the Service currently uses two statistically based instruments (discussed later in this article) to identify and reassess the criminogenic need of its offenders.

A wealth of literature clearly demonstrates that actuarial prediction tools consistently outperform prediction methods that rely

exclusively on clinical assessments.¹⁸ Actuarial methods offer correctional professionals some definite advantages over clinical approaches:

- they are generally more systematic and consistent;
- they are usually more accurate;
- they represent a fairer assessment (Clinical judgment tends to be more conservative to avoid “false negatives.”);
- they offer greater legal protection for the assessor; and
- they are more efficient. (The assessor is not required to explain his or her approach to the assessment and conclusions for each case.)

Andrews and Bonta do argue, though, that correctional staff should use actuarial information provided by the application of the risk, need and responsivity principles in an informed and sensitive way. Although they are efficient, empirical tools are still subject to error. Carefully using professional judgment to override objective results in exceptional cases can improve the accuracy of assessments; this principle applies to all situations where clinical and objective assessments are used jointly.

How does the Service assess offender needs?

Offender Intake Assessment: In 1994 the Correctional Service of Canada replaced existing penitentiary placement practices with the OIA process, a systematic approach to assessment at admission. Information is obtained from various internal and external sources, including the courts, police, probation officers, victims, family members, employers and the offender. The OIA may also include supplementary assessments in such areas as education/vocation, psychology, family violence and psychopathy. Using a multidisciplinary team approach and case conferencing, case managers at centralized intake units then integrate the information into a comprehensive summary report. For each offender, case managers provide an overall risk/need rating, ranging from “low/low” to “high/high.” Since implementation of the OIA, all newly admitted federal offenders have been assigned a risk/need classification. This assessment

information is currently available for 11,530 Correctional Service of Canada inmates, representing more than 93% of the Service’s incarcerated population.¹⁹

The intake assessment report uses a revolutionary automated format for recording information: details of the assessment are entered on screen in the Offender Management System (OMS), the Service’s mainframe computer network. In each area of the assessment, indicators (short statements describing a risk factor) are flagged where present, and risk and need levels are rated. This approach makes it possible to combine precise statistical information related to offender need and risk for use by managers and researchers.

The OIA process has two main components: criminal risk assessment and case needs identification and analysis.

Criminal risk assessment: The offender’s criminal risk level is rated as high, medium or low based on a systematic review of static risk information concerning the offender’s criminal history, including previous adult and youth court involvement, details about use of violence and sex offending, and the results of an actuarial recidivism prediction scale (SIR-R1).

Case needs identification and analysis: Using a similar approach, the offender’s case needs level is rated based on a detailed review of seven need areas:

- employment;
- marital/family;
- associates/social interaction;
- substance abuse;
- community functioning;
- personal/emotional orientation; and
- attitude.

For each need area, case managers flag indicators (risk factors) and rate the severity of need. They also provide details and programming recommendations for need dimensions requiring intervention, describe the offender’s motivation for change and other specific characteristics (e.g., learning disabilities), chronicle the offender’s social history and note any immediate concerns (suicide, physical and mental health).

How does the Service use this information?

An accurate assessment of the offender's risk/need classification informs case management decisions throughout the offender's sentence:

- the information collected and analyzed during the OIA process is used to make decisions about the need for immediate intervention or intensive supervision, programming and security requirements, initial custody level and assignment to a placement institution;
- at the receiving institution, the results of the intake risk/needs assessment forms the basis of the offender's correctional treatment plan: criminogenic needs are ranked and targeted for intervention, with intensity of treatment corresponding to the offender's level of risk;
- decisions to transfer the offender to reduced security, to grant a conditional release to the community or to detain the offender past the statutory release date are also based on a structured assessment of the offender's risk and need; and
- once the offender is granted a supervised release, parole officers use the Community Intervention Scale, an actuarial risk/needs instrument implemented in 1990, to determine the minimum frequency of supervision contacts and to orient management of the case.

Task Force on Reintegration of Offenders

Not all the processes described above are functioning as well as they should. Responding to internal and external pressures to review its case management operations, the Service formed the Task Force on Reintegration of Offenders, which submitted its final report²⁰ in January 1997. The Task Force recognized that the Correctional Service of Canada is legally mandated to use the least restrictive measures consistent with the protection of the public, and that management of offenders according to the risk, need and responsivity principles can help the Service fulfil that mandate.

Among the many recommendations put forward by the Task Force was a proposal to use a risk-related differentiation process to place offenders into three intervention categories based on the risk/needs rating produced through the OIA:

1. release-oriented intervention for low-risk offenders;
2. institutional and community intervention for moderate-risk offenders; and
3. high-intensity intervention for offenders in the high-risk category.

Other findings related to the risk, need and responsivity principles include recommendations for the Service to:

- focus more on risk management tools;
- broaden the range of techniques to manage risk; and
- review the design and application of the Case Needs Identification and Analysis (CNIA) instrument to ensure it helps staff accurately identify and rank criminogenic need.

What changes are forthcoming?

In response to the Task Force's specific recommendation regarding the CNIA, the Service's Research Branch and Correctional Operations Sector will be consulting field staff across the country to review recent research findings related to the predictive ability and usefulness of the components of the CNIA instrument.

An operational review group known as Operation Bypass has identified several significant changes to case management operations, soon to be implemented, that will affect risk/needs assessment and management practices in the Service. Included in the changes are:

- the creation of a reintegration potential rating based exclusively on the results of multiple risk/needs assessment instruments (OIA, SIR-R1, Custody Rating Scale);
- the periodic reassessment of risk/needs ratings throughout the period of incarceration (currently possible only during the period of community supervision);

- the more prominent placement of risk/needs assessment results in reports prepared by staff for decision-making purposes; and
- a restructuring of OMS to facilitate electronic management of case information, the preparation of reports and the automatic calculation of actuarial risk scores.

It is clear that the Correctional Service of Canada now recognizes the contribution that objective risk assessment can make to the

management of the offenders under its charge. Research conducted within and outside the Service has been invaluable in helping to establish a strategic direction that will enable the Service to achieve its Mission. This is particularly true for offender needs; the assessment of criminogenic needs is becoming increasingly important in providing the focus for our correctional interventions. ■

¹ 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9.

² Mission Statement: "The Correctional Service of Canada, as part of the criminal justice system and respecting the rule of law, contributes to the protection of society by actively encouraging and assisting offenders to become law-abiding citizens, while exercising reasonable, safe, secure and humane control." Source: Communication Branch, *The Mission of the Correctional Service of Canada* (Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada, 1997).

³ D. A. Andrews and J. Bonta, *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct* (Cincinnati, OH: Anderson Publishing Co., 1994).

⁴ *Criminogenic needs* may be defined as those offender need areas in which treatment gain will reduce the likelihood of recidivism; they have also been referred to as dynamic risk or contributing factors. On the other hand, *non-criminogenic needs* are those need areas that, while dynamic, are **not** associated with a potential reduction in recidivism; they have also been referred to as non-contributing factors.

⁵ M. W. Lipsey, "What do we learn from 400 research studies on the effectiveness of treatment with juvenile delinquents?" *What Works: Reducing Reoffending*, J. McGuire, ed. (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 1995): 63-78; and D. A. Andrews, *Toward the Expanded Meta-analysis: Theoretical Issues*, paper presented at the American Society of Criminology meetings, Boston, 1995, in: Don A. Andrews, "Criminal recidivism is predictable and can be influenced: An update," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 8, 3 (1996): 42-44.

⁶ L. L. Motiuk and S. L. Brown, *The Validity of Offender Needs Identification and Analysis in Community Corrections*, Report R-34 (Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada, 1993).

⁷ B. Grant and C. Gillis, *Day Parole Program Review: Case Management Predictors of Outcome*, Report R-52 (Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada, 1996).

⁸ D. A. Andrews and D. Robinson, *The Level of Supervision Inventory: Second Report* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Ministry of Correctional Services, Research Services, 1984).

⁹ P. Gendreau and C. Goggin, "Principles of effective correctional programming," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 8, 3 (1996): 38-40. See also P. Gendreau, T. Little and C. Goggin, *A Meta-Analysis of the Predictors of Adult Offender Recidivism: Assessment Guidelines for Classification and Treatment* (Toronto, ON: Corrections Branch, Ontario Ministry Secretariat, 1995).

¹⁰ Motiuk and Brown, *The Validity of Offender Needs Identification and Analysis in Community Corrections*.

¹¹ B. Grant and C. Gillis, *Day Parole Program Outcome, Criminal History and Other Predictors of Successful Sentence Completion* (Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada, in press).

¹² K. Blanchette, "Comparing violent and non-violent female offenders on risk and need," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 9, 2 (1997): 14-18.

¹³ K. Blanchette, "A profile of federally sentenced women in the community: Addressing needs for successful integration," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 10, 1 (1998): 40-43.

¹⁴ C. Dowden, *A Meta-Analytic Examination of the Risk, Need and Responsivity Principles and Their Importance Within the Rehabilitation Debate*, unpublished M.A. thesis (Ottawa, ON: Psychology Department, Carleton University, 1998).

¹⁵ Andrews and Bonta, *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct*.

¹⁶ Andrews and Bonta, *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct*. See also J. Bonta, "The responsivity principle and offender rehabilitation," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 7, 3 (1995): 34-37.

¹⁷ For a description of CMCS and a review of CMCS evaluation studies see: C. Baird and D. Neuenfeldt, "Improving correctional performance through better classification: The client management classification system," *NCCD Focus* (August 1990): 1-7. (NCCD is the National Council on Crime and Delinquency.)

¹⁸ See the following works for a thorough examination of the issue of clinical versus statistical judgment in prediction and decision-making: William M. Grove and Paul E. Meehl, "Comparative efficiency of informal (subjective, impressionistic) and formal (mechanical, algorithmic) prediction procedures: The clinical-statistical controversy," *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 2, 2 (1996): 293-323. See also C. D. Webster, G. T. Harris, M. E. Rice, C. Cormier and V. L. Quinsey, *The Violence Prediction Scheme: Assessing Dangerousness in High Risk Men* (Toronto, ON: Centre of Criminology, University of Toronto, 1994). And see V. L. Quinsey, G. T. Harris, M. E. Rice, and C. A. Cormier, *Violent Offenders: Appraising and Managing Risk* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1998).

¹⁹ Data from Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, August 1998.

²⁰ Correctional Service Canada, *Task Force on Reintegration, Final Report* (Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada, 1997).