

The Case Needs Review Project: Background and research strategy

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In 1996, the Correctional Service of Canada assembled a Task Force on Reintegration of Offenders with a mandate to provide explicit recommendations for enhancing the reintegration of offenders back into the community. The Task Force specifically recommended that the Service review the Case Needs Identification and Analysis (CNIA) component of the Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) process. This article describes an initiative launched by the Research Branch to meet this recommendation and establishes a frame of reference for the remaining articles in this issue.

Background

In the late 1980s and early 1990s a series of public inquiries and Service task force reports underscored a need for improved offender assessment and information-sharing within and between components of the criminal justice system. Consequently, the Service assembled a National Offender Intake Assessment Working Group with the mandate to design and develop a systematic approach to offender assessment on admission to a federal correctional institution. After consultation and an extensive literature review, the working group developed, piloted and eventually implemented the Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) process in November 1994.²

Briefly, the OIA is a comprehensive and integrated evaluation of the offender at the time of admission. It begins with an assessment of immediate physical and mental health needs, security risks, and suicide potential. Afterward, the offender is assessed by the Criminal Risk Assessment (CRA) and Case Needs Identification and Analysis (CNIA) components of the OIA. This information is then used to determine the offender's institutional placement and correctional plan.³

What is Case Needs Identification and Analysis?

The CNIA protocol identifies seven need domains, including employment, marital/family, associates, substance abuse, community functioning, personal/emotional, and attitude. Each need domain is subsequently divided into principal components, and in some cases, subcomponents. The subcomponents are a series of yes/no indicators, about 200 in total.

About half of the indicators are accompanied by 'help messages' that facilitate scoring. As an example, the substance abuse domain has 3 principal components, 7 subcomponents, and 29 indicators. The principal component 'abuses alcohol' has three corresponding subcomponents, 'pattern', 'situations' and 'interference'. Sample indicators associated with the 'pattern' subcomponent include 'drinks on a regular basis' and 'has a history of drinking binges'.

Using the indicator ratings as a guide, each need domain is rated on either a three- or four-point scale ranging from 'factor seen as an asset to community adjustment' to 'considerable need for improvement'. An overall low-, medium- or high-needs rating is created by compiling information derived

from the severity and number of needs identified by the CNIA, information derived from the post-sentence community assessment, and information gleaned from the initial assessment of immediate medical, health and suicide concerns. As with the individual case need ratings, the overall need level is derived largely through professional judgment (see Motiuk, this volume, for more information).

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Project impetus

Since the implementation of the OIA, three audits conducted by the Auditor General of Canada⁴ have concluded, “that there are systemic weaknesses in the Service’s management of its reintegration activities...”⁵ In response, the Service assembled the Task Force on Reintegration of Offenders with the explicit mandate to identify essential problem areas and to suggest how to enhance the reintegration process. In regard to the OIA, the Task Force specifically recommended “that the design and application of the CNIA instrument be reviewed to ensure it identifies and prioritizes only those offender needs related to criminal behaviour.”⁶ In response, the Research Branch launched a three-tiered initiative to address this recommendation.

Research strategy

The first initiative involved a statistical examination of the CNIA and criminal recidivism. As of March 31, 1998, more than 12,500 full OIAs have been completed. A further 3,380 offenders assessed by the OIA have since been released and subsequently followed up. Results from this initiative are presented by Motiuk (this volume).

For the second initiative, an external review of each need domain was conducted. The emphasis was on predictive studies that examined the ability of a given need domain and its corresponding components and indicators to predict criminal recidivism in adult offender populations. Further, reviewers were asked to provide recommendations for streamlining the CNIA. The Research Branch conducted the community functioning review internally and contracted with several external experts to complete the other reviews. The volume of literature on substance abuse prompted the Branch to undertake two reviews: an external review that focused largely on assessment-related issues and an internal review that examined the relationship between substance abuse risk factors and criminal behaviour.

Each review involved a quantitative meta-analysis, a qualitative narrative review or a combination of the two. A meta-analysis is a statistical technique that allows researchers to objectively aggregate the size of a relationship between two variables (i.e., criminal associates and recidivism) across numerous studies in the form of an effect size or correlation coefficient. A narrative review involves a qualitative examination of a given area whereby a reviewer reads all relevant literature and renders a summary statement based on the reviewer’s subjective interpretation. Both approaches are useful for theory building, identification of new research directions and assessment of the current state of the literature.⁷

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The final component of this project is a two-tiered consultation phase. The first stage of the consultation was conducted at the Service’s National Headquarters. The target audience included stakeholders from Program Development and Evaluation, Aboriginal Affairs, Women Offenders, Research, Policy, Strategic Planning, and Reintegration. This stage involved a one-day symposium during which reviewers summarized their main findings and recommendations. The findings from the CNIA statistical review were also presented. In essence, this issue of *Forum* presents the material delivered at that symposium.

The second stage of the consultation, scheduled for the near future, has three objectives: to disseminate the research findings that emerged from this initiative to people working in the field; to receive input from field staff regarding the practical utility and desirability of the proposed recommendations; and to receive feedback from the field regarding the operational impact of dropping indicators with either no or weak support, retaining indicators with moderate or strong support, and adding new indicators identified as theoretically or empirically promising. After the field consultations, the CNIA will be revised in accordance with the research findings and the operational needs raised by relevant stakeholders. ■

- ¹ 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9.
- ² L. L. Motiuk, "Classification for correctional programming: The offender intake assessment process," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 9, 1 (1997): 18–22.
- ³ Motiuk, "Classification for correctional programming: The offender intake assessment process."
- ⁴ Auditor General of Canada, *Correctional Service of Canada—Supervision of Released Offenders*, Cat. no. FA1-1994/11E (Ottawa, ON: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1994); Auditor General of Canada, *Correctional Service of Canada—Rehabilitation Programs for Offenders*, Cat. no. FA1-1996/1-10E. (Ottawa, ON: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1996); Auditor General of Canada, *Correctional Service of Canada—Reintegration of Offenders*, Cat. no. FA1-1996/3-30E (Ottawa, ON: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1996).
- ⁵ Auditor General of Canada, *Correctional Service of Canada—Reintegration of Offenders*.
- ⁶ Correctional Service of Canada, *Task Force on Reintegration, Final Report* (Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada, 1997). Available from the Offender Reintegration Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, ON K1A 0P9.
- ⁷ J. McGuire and P. Priestley, "Reviewing 'What works': Past, present and future," *What Works: Reducing Reoffending: Guidelines from Research and Practice*, J. McGuire, Ed. (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 1995): 3–34.

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