

## Contrecoups: A program of therapy for spousal and family violence<sup>1</sup>

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Four years ago, the Quebec Region of the Correctional Service of Canada introduced a treatment program for offenders at risk for spousal or family abuse. This program, known as “Contrecoups”(which may be translated as “rebound” or “repercussions”), takes a holistic approach. Group sessions are offered to inmates who are motivated to work out their family violence problems. The program is run at the minimum-security Montée St-François Institution. There are 24 biweekly meetings for groups of 8 inmates. The meetings are scheduled before the offenders’ release and we insist on continuing their therapy after release. This article reports on the achievements of Contrecoups after four years in operation.

To implement this program, the Service contracted with a community organization, Option, which specializes in group therapy with violent spouses. Option was given a mandate to implement the program in a penitentiary and provide training to a team of Service therapists who could eventually take over from the contract therapists. The first therapy group was ready on April 21, 1993, under the guidance of a Service therapist and a contract therapist. Now, two “home-grown” therapists and one contract supervisor make up our team.

### **Consequences of the therapy**

For our first report on Contrecoups, we focused on the consequences of this therapy in terms of the participants’ parole experience and performance under supervision, as well on their recidivism rate. When we can conduct more rigorous and detailed research, we will be able to draw more valuable conclusions. Between April 1993 and May 1997, case management officers had referred 172 offenders to Contrecoups. One hundred and twenty-eight cases were assessed and we accepted 84 of them (65.6%). There were 11 therapy groups, from April 21, 1993, to December 20, 1996. We rejected the other 44 cases (34.4%) on the grounds of poor motivation, failure to admit their crimes, insufficient time remaining to be served,

and transfer request denied. Among the cases accepted, 68 inmates (80.9%) completed the program and 51 (75%) have been released to date. Among those granted conditional release by the National Parole Board, 32 (62.7%) obtained day parole and 5 (9.8%) were given full parole. The other 14 (27.5%) were released on their statutory release date. Of the 51 inmates who have been released, 19 (37.3%) have finished their sentence. Only 23 (45%) of these 51 released offenders continued group therapy for violent spouses in the community (see Table 1). If we compare outcomes in the two groups for crimes of spousal violence, we may observe that therapeutic counselling following release had a beneficial effect. Only 2 (8.6%) of the released inmates who followed a program of therapy in their community committed a further act of spousal abuse, compared with 6 (21.4%) who followed no community therapy program.

**Table 1**

<b>Outcome: Cases and Rates</b>		
	<b>Community therapy program (n = 23)</b>	<b>No community therapy program (n = 28)</b>
Reoffended with spousal violence	2 (8.6%)	6 (21.1%)
Did not reoffend with spousal violence	21 (91.1%)	22 (78.6%)

As you can see, the recidivism rate among the offenders who followed the Contrecoups program is 15.7% (or 8 of 51 cases). Since most studies put the rate of reoffending for spousal abuse at 30% to 70%, it appears that the Contrecoups program has so far had a very positive impact on recidivism rates. It is possible, however, that community supervision also played a role in reducing the recidivism rate. Further study will permit us to isolate this variable and show the impact of the program itself on the recidivism rate.

Another consideration to be borne mind is the effect Return Rates with Spousal Violence iveness of the risk assessment conducted by case management teams at Montée St-François Institution. Of the 8 inmates who reoffended for spousal abuse, violence 5 (62.5%) had been released on their statutory comparison release date and one had been released on day parole just before his statutory release date. Of the 27.5% of inmates who were released program on statutory release and who completed their mentioned participation in Contrecoups, 62.5% (5 out of It is likely 8) reoffended. This shows that the assessment by the of risk to reoffend was fairly accurate in most of these cases, although it must be admitted that risk assessment is still not an exact This shows that science, especially where spousal violence is concerned.

We compared these data with those risk to reoffend of a similar group of offenders. The files of the 88 cases that had been referred to Contrecoups were not accepted for a comparison group. We selected cases in which although it must a pattern of spousal violence had been clearly identified and rejected be admitted that cases that had followed any group risk assessment therapy program on the outside (e.g., group therapy for sex is still not an offenders), to minimize the risk exact science, of interference between the impact of the therapy group for violent especially where spouses and the risk of recidivism. We believe that some of the other problems that are treated through group therapy may also have an impact on spousal violence. We picked 44 cases that met these criteria for the comparison group.

We compared the return rates for the different groups with their participation in Contrecoups and in post-release treatment programs. Outcome data include all the offenders whose conditional release was suspended to prevent, or because of, further spousal violence. Table 2 shows the results of this comparison.

The 27.8% return rate among offenders who follow any post-release treatment is comparable to the

lower figure in the literature (30% to 70%).<sup>3</sup> It is likely that the supervision conducted by the Service also affected this result in a positive way.

**Table 2**

<b>Outcome: Cases and Rates</b>		
	Offenders who completed Contrecoups (n = 51)	Offenders who did not participate in Contrecoups(n = 44)
Followed post-release treatment program	8.6%	0.0%
Did not follow post-release treatment program	21.6%	27.8

When we compare the return rates in Table 2 for the offenders who followed a treatment program after their release with the rates for those who followed no such programs, we see that following a program had a significant impact. This shows the importance of continuing treatment after completing Contrecoups.

### **What does the future hold in store?**

Right from the start, the Contrecoups therapists informed the case management teams that they did not have any specific tool for assessing the risk presented by the offenders who were enrolled in the program. We are in the process of studying research reports on risk assessment so that we can develop an instrument that would let us measure the risk presented by the participants in Contrecoups. But this also raises another question: what will be the impact of this instrument on the therapeutic environment? Although we always try to separate offenders who come to therapy because they truly want to change from those who come for reasons other than a genuine motivation to change, the fact that an assessment is to be made on the risk that they represent might raise certain concerns or expectations on their part.

One of the strategies we are considering is to separate risk assessment from the therapeutic environment. A program officer who is not involved in Contrecoups could administer the tests while the therapists are delivering the program. This would keep the therapists from affecting the test results while still enabling them to obtain some idea of how the participants were progressing with their therapy.

Taken together, these data could constitute a body of valuable information for case management teams, who could use it to build a risk assessment that was much more specifically related and relevant to the theme of spousal violence.

We also wonder whether it is possible to adapt a treatment program similar to Contrecoups for offenders

who are violent outside the family setting.

The Contrecoups program has been transferred to the Federal Training Centre, which also offers spousal violence awareness and pre-treatment programs. In view of the increasing demand, and need, for spousal/family abuse treatment, we want to target clients for Contrecoups more effectively, on the basis of these programs. With the help of caseworkers from the other programs, we would like to write a brochure that spells out the characteristics of the target clients of the various spousal/ family violence programs.

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1. Therapy coordinator and therapist, respectively.

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3. D. G. Dutton, *The Domestic Assault of Women: Psychological and Criminal Justice Perspective* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 1995).

See also L. K. Hamberger and J. E. Hastings, "Court-mandated treatment of men who assault their partner: Issues, controversies, and outcomes," in *Legal Responses to Wife Assault: Current Trends and Evaluation*, N. Z. Hilton, ed. (Newbury Park, CA, Sage Publications, 1993): 188–229.