

Managing offender risk through revocations

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As a federal correctional service, why would we want to consider reducing revocations? As our mandate is to protect society, why would we not want to look at every possible avenue to return those who have committed crimes in the past to custody?

These are questions that often enter the minds of community members and are asked of professional correctional workers in public forums. The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) believes strongly in gradual, supervised releases and believes that our task is to protect society by assisting and encouraging offenders to be law abiding. Incarceration and incapacitation are important considerations for some offenders at certain times however; they are short-term fixes for a social problem. Eventually, with a few exceptions, the problem will be returned to the community and it is in the community that the problem originated. Therefore, the treatment of the problem must also occur in the community.

Community supervision

All offenders being released to the community represent some level of risk to reoffend given the fact that they have already committed crime. However, the task of community supervision is to manage the risk the offenders represent and assist the offenders to address the risk factors that have been identified. CSC has implemented a very comprehensive intake assessment process that systematically reviews the offender's risk factors as they enter the system. Staff has been trained to identify the static risk factors, analyze the offender's behaviour and determine the contributing factors to criminal behaviour (dynamic risk factors). The role of supervision in the community is to monitor the risk factors and ensure that they are being addressed through some form of programming or treatment. Parole officers must be sensitive to the factors involved in each case and make ongoing assessments regarding the degree to which the case is being effectively managed. When it is felt that there is escalation in risk, the parole officer must intervene and determine the best course of action to take to ensure the risk is effectively managed.

Conditions to assist in managing risk

Attached to every release are standard terms and conditions that the offender must follow and the parole officer must monitor to ensure compliance

with the release. In addition, the National Parole Board (NPB) may impose special conditions if they are reasonable and necessary to manage risk. If there is a breach of the special condition, the parole officer must notify the NPB and indicate the action that has been taken with respect to the breach. Each time a breach occurs, the NPB must take a decision. This process paves the way for revocation.

In the writer's opinion, there is an overuse of special conditions and I question how necessary the conditions are. Special conditions and the required processes that are attached to them interfere with developing innovative supervision practices and limit the parole officer in dealing with problem situations. Offenders present a myriad of difficulties in reintegrating back to the community as they are for the most part, multi-needed individuals and often have complex lives. The challenge for the parole staff is to work through the problem areas and ensure the offender is taking part in the appropriate programs within the community that will increase their success in achieving a lifestyle free of criminal behaviour. The parole officer must be afforded the opportunity to work with the offender and encourage the offender to address their problem area without the imposition of a special condition. If necessary, the condition may be requested by the parole staff and imposed by the NPB at any time.

To seriously look at reducing revocations and seeking alternatives to revocation to successfully reintegrate the offender, we need to ensure that the appropriate resources are in place to deal with these difficult situations/offenders. As public safety is key to our decision-making, we must ensure that our effort to work with the offender and deal with the situation in the community is continuing to provide the protection to the community. We need crisis intervention programs that can be accessed when a problem arises. Many times, an offender may continue to be managed in the community if we can immediately address the concerns that have made suspension a consideration. If this is available, the case may continue to be managed in the community and the need to seek a revocation decision would be lessened. In the absence of a special condition, we negate the requirement to seek a decision by the NPB whenever the offender has a slip and empower the staff to manage the offender.

To reincarcerate or not...

The challenge for parole staff is to assess when the behaviour has reached a point in the community where the risk can no longer be managed and the only way to avoid further criminal behaviour is to suspend the offender's release. A recent national study on revocations revealed that of 140 cases reviewed, the revocation recommendation was made only after several breaches of a condition were dealt with and all alternatives to revocation had been exhausted.² But, was a crime about to be committed or had parole staff simply exhausted their tolerance to work with the offender's difficulties in adhering to a condition? Sometimes parole staff move toward suspension as they live in fear of an investigation into the management and supervision of a case that will be criticized for not taking more severe action for obvious breaches of conditions. This leads to the attitude that it is better to err on the side of caution. Many of correctional processes in place lead parole staff to recommend revocation.

Availability of community options

If we are serious about working with offenders in the community, we need to develop the structure to manage the most difficult clients in the community at times when they are at risk. We need to have the availability of programs, residential space, detoxification facilities, halfway back measures and intensive supervision regimes that can assist an offender through a crisis in the community. The return to prison is not a long-term solution as this has often been a pattern that offenders have relied on for a lengthy period of their lives. It is the pain and effort to work through a crisis while maintaining community living that is a challenge for all community members and offenders in particular. This is where those who manage correctional services must ensure that appropriate resources are in place to deal with the crisis.

Programs such as intensive supervision can be applied to work more closely with those offenders who represent a risk to the community and expend the time and resources on dealing with the crisis situation and revising the supervision plan to deal with the crisis in the community. This leads to teaching the offender how to deal with a crisis in the community and may lead to the development of new skills to assist the offender in dealing with future difficulties.

To effectively deal with offenders in the community, we need to fully develop and monitor every offender's crime cycle. The development of the cycle does not end at intake. We need to focus the supervision of the offender while incarcerated on the further elaboration of the cycle. Once released to the community, the cycle must be the focus of supervision and we need to monitor and intervene when the events of the cycle

begin to reappear. To do this, the staff need to have an array of programs and services to immediately address the concern at hand. If the parole staff are constantly monitoring the offence cycle, through the various supervision practices (combination of office/employment/family interviews, contacts with program providers/therapists, collateral contacts with family/friends and other community individuals) they will be more likely to intervene at the appropriate time to avoid further criminal behaviour. The intervention, however, does not need to be immediate suspension in all cases, but may be an agreed upon change in circumstances or a revision in the plan for supervision. Community involvement with the offender to support attitudes and values reflective of law-abiding behaviour is also key to effective reintegration. The use of volunteers, community agencies and other community members to assist offenders with their reintegration is key to the development of an array of services available to assist in managing risk.

Conclusion

The desire to reduce revocations is led by the desire to safely reintegrate the offender into the community and provide the offender with the necessary skills to deal with problematic situations without resorting to criminal behaviour. Processes that are built into correctional organizations often interfere with successful reintegration. The teaching of coping skills through cognitive behavioural programs and equipping parole staff with a variety of tools, skills, innovative techniques and autonomy to effectively monitor offenders in the community will result in more timely interventions and more successful reintegration measures. Overloading the offender with conditions does not allow the parole staff to be innovative in their supervision techniques.

We need to rely on our risk assessment processes and the professional judgement of staff. We need to ensure staff are trained and are confident in the decisions they make and are able to make sound, rational decisions based on risk principles.

The involvement of the community to a greater extent in assisting with reintegration and monitoring will strengthen our ability to deal with the offender in the community and lead to successful reintegration. To ensure the safety of our community, we need to make every effort to work with the offenders in the community to reach a point where they are integrated and have the tools to deal with problem situations without resorting to criminal activity. ■

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² Please see the *Revocation Study*, Institutional Reintegration Operations, Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada (1999).