Defining correctional programs

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Using interventions in forms that may be described as programs is not new, and there are examples of this kind of work dating back to the 1940s. The research indicates that the true era of development in this sphere commenced about in 1975. This article examines what correctional staff and researchers mean when they talk about a program. This is not as straightforward as it sounds, and it is difficult to arrive at a single, clear-cut, unassailable definition of correctional programs that will firmly demarcate them from other forms of activity conducted with individuals sentenced by criminal courts.

First, it will be helpful to set this in a broader context. Correctional programs as we currently observe them being implemented whether in institutional or community settings have a common primary objective. The desired changes may include imparting knowledge, acquisition of skills, or improved health. But in criminal justice services, this usually hinges upon the concept of *correction*: the adjustment of behaviour from a pattern that is criminal or anti-social to one that is more law-abiding or pro-social.

Correctional programming has numerous points of contact and degrees of overlap with other types of intervention that have the essential aim of engendering individual change on the basis of personal choice. This includes *education,* that focuses on helping individuals acquire knowledge and information. It includes *training,* which is designed to help people acquire manual or cognitive skills for application in the workplace. It also includes *therapy,* that is intended for alleviation of emotional distress and amelioration of symptoms of mental disorder. All of these processes also instil new modes of thinking and problem-solving that are transferable across situations, and often also new perceptions of and attitudes to the self. Thinking more broadly and considering how this would be viewed in a non Western cultural context, there are also similarities to processes of *healing*. Each of these domains is virtually impossible to define in any simple, satisfactory and mutually exclusive way.

Recently, in the wake of large-scale reviews of the effectiveness of psychological therapies, there has been a trend towards standardisation and *manualisation* of the procedures to be followed.[2] This is partly to allow systematic testing of interventions in carefully controlled research trials. But it is also designed to allow other practitioners to emulate the 'best practices' identified in such work. In addition, for those types of problems that are experienced by many clients, it has proved possible to develop *empirically supported treatments* the ingredients of which can be described in detail in accompanying therapist manuals. Over the last quarter of a century, a similar idea has progressively become implanted in correctional services, and today holds a position of some prominence.

Types and levels of interventions

The concept of *program* is now widely discussed in correctional settings, but evidently still means different things to different people. To refine the concept slightly, a useful starting point is to examine different approaches to crime prevention and to the intervention efforts that might be planned and delivered within each. For this purpose we can borrow a familiar distinction, made by Tolan, Guerra and Hammond,[3] between *primary, secondary* and *tertiary* crime prevention strategies.

Primary prevention consists of two different types of strategies. *Situational prevention* is designed to limit crime opportunities, sometimes by increased security measures, police patrols, video surveillance, target hardening, or the re-design of environments in residential or retail zones. Interventions of this type are sometimes referred to as programs; for example, neighbourhood watch programs. *Developmental prevention* entails provision of services to families and children in environments, such as socio-economically deprived neighbourhoods, with the aim of reducing long term difficulties including delinquency but also school dropout, mental health problems and substance abuse. Such developmental prevention programs have shown to be potentially highly effective; and in some instances, such as the *Perry Preschool Project,* have also been shown to be highly cost-effective over long-term follow-up intervals.

Secondary prevention is focused on known at-risk groups. This includes for example individuals who are identified as pre-delinquents, who are playing

truant from school, have conduct disorders, or are residents of child-care facilities. In some cases there may be evidence of development of delinquent or anti-social tendencies and efforts are directed towards averting subsequent involvement in juvenile offending. In other circumstances prevention may be broadly aimed at averting gang involvement or drug use in the school population as a whole.

Tertiary prevention is addressed to adjudicated offenders, those already convicted of crimes, with the objective of reducing rates of recidivism. This is the domain of correctional services and the subject-matter of the present article. Note however that correctional services need not be exclusively focused on tertiary prevention; for example youth justice teams may be engaged in some multi-agency programs with a secondary prevention focus.

Basic concept and definitions

To an extent, the way a correctional program is defined depends in part on what we consider to be the overall function of society's correctional efforts. This raises rather daunting philosophical questions, concerning the nature of justice or social order, which are beyond the scope of this article, but the fact that these issues are inter-dependent should be constantly borne in mind.

On scanning the literature it is possible to discover that the word 'program' is used in at least three separate though inter-related ways.

Definition one

The types of interventions known as *programs* may be employed at any of the levels mentioned above (primary, secondary, or tertiary), but for present purposes discussion will be limited to the tertiary, in which most correctional service agencies usually operate. Within this context, the typical program is a circumscribed set of activities, with an appointed objective, and consisting of a number of elements that are mutually inter-connected. In its first, strictest terms, a correctional program can be defined at its core as a planned sequence of learning opportunities delivered to adjudicated offenders with the general objective of reducing their subsequent criminal recidivism. From a behavioural perspective, it is intrinsic to this that a *constructional* approach is adopted. This entails the reduction of undesirable

behaviour through the application of positive reinforcement procedures and repertoire-building techniques.

This definition implies that a program has a specified objective and it should be possible for this to be clearly stated by its designers, users, evaluators and preferably also its participants. There may be intermediate objectives that in practice are only distantly connected to the goal of reducing recidivism; but the nature of any such linkage should be explained in supporting program documentation. There should be a planned sequence of activities; this might be called a curriculum: a series of sessions or a timetable. It is the physical representation of what is involved in trying to operationalize the program's objectives. The program should have internal coherence, in the sense that the activities that are planned can be shown to be justifiable for achieving the objectives. This should hold both *theoretically* (there is a sound model on which the design of the program is based) and *empirically* (there is evidence concerning its effectiveness, either as a totality or in terms of its components).

Definition two

In corrections the word *program* is also used in a second, broader and more flexible sense. For example, mentoring schemes for young offenders, or therapeutic communities for substance-abusing offenders are also referred to as programs. In the purer sense of definition one, the term is a misnomer. But it is possible to specify the objectives of both these processes and to define operationally what is intended to happen within them. Thus if the experiences which are to be arranged for participants can be adequately described, to the extent that other practitioners could adopt and replicate them, it is still accurate to use the word program as applicable to these interventions.

Activities such as mentoring, intensive supervision, or physical challenge do not however contain the detailed pre-planning or expectation of measured development that is a central feature of programs in definition one. Individual change may occur, but there is no explicit structure or designated sequence through which the participants progresses as is the case in, for example, a cognitive skills program.

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This flexibility of nomenclature can lead to confusion. Mentoring may be an added element in a juvenile correctional service in which young offenders also participate in structured activities programs that would satisfy the first definition given above. That might similarly occur in the setting of a therapeutic community. Evidently, it is very difficult to delineate the outer limits of what is meant by a correctional program.

Definition three

Taking a far broader perspective, MacKenzie[4] has classified criminal justice interventions into six separate but overlapping groups, as follows.

- *Incapacitation.* Removing the offender's capacity to commit crimes, usually through detention (incarceration).

- *Deterrence.* Punitive sanctions which as a result of the infliction of pain or discomfort will deter individual offenders subjected to them (specific deterrence) or other potential offenders and members of the public-at-large (general deterrence). The primary means of accomplishing this is through restriction of liberty but additional sanctions may also be applied as in a correctional boot camp.

- *Rehabilitation.* Provision of treatment or allied forms of intervention designed to alter the thoughts, feelings or behaviour of individual offenders.

- *Community restraints.* This includes surveillance, supervision, or other methods of closely monitoring an individual's behaviour or sphere of activities such as to preclude engagement with crime opportunities.

- *Structure, discipline and challenge.* Physically (and sometimes mentally) demanding experiences designed to influence the individuals' attitudes in a positive way or to act as a deterrent against further criminality.

- *Combining rehabilitation and restraint.* An amalgamation of methods of treatment with methods of surveillance or limitation of liberty that will enforce compliance with requirements.

This constitutes, potentially, a third definition of the word "program". It may be important however to distinguish between the above aspects which are structures of the criminal justice system and that flow directly from judicial sentencing; and efforts made by other correctional agencies to introduce active change ingredients into the context set by this framework. While it is a widespread public expectation that the sentence of a court will in itself have an impact on offenders, there is little evidence to support this supposition. Examination of data concerning the differential impact of sentencing on recidivism, using official criminal statistics and making comparisons between predicted and actual rates of re-offending amongst large samples, shows that sentencing *per se* is largely irrelevant to outcome[5]. It is on this basis that Andrews has argued that the sentence can only ever be the starting condition for programmatic intervention.[6]

We might also question whether punishment and deterrence can be conceptualised as *programs.* From a layperson's standpoint, the *raison-d'être* of criminal justice is to punish offenders for their wrongdoing. Punishment is, metaphorically speaking, the correctional equivalent of cosmic background radiation in physics; pervasive and ever-present.

Perhaps the focal defining aspect of a program does not reside in the kinds of external, directly observable components described earlier. Rather, the pivotal feature could be the proposed *vehicle of change.* This is the mechanism within a program which it is presumed (or preferably, firmly demonstrated) will produce the difference in recidivism that is the program designer's and the agency's ultimate goal.

Varieties of offender programs

One of the recurrent difficulties of defining programs on the basis of available literature is that descriptions of them are often used in loose, overlapping, and sometimes incompatible ways. The same program can be conceptualised in different terms depending on which aspect of it is highlighted. In addition, reviewers of research (including meta-analysts) invariably develop their own classification or coding systems when grouping programs together to compare effect sizes. Thus, an interpersonal skills program could be defined straightforwardly by that label. But equally, it could be categorised the headings *skills-training, behavioural,* or *cognitive* depending on which aspect of it a reviewer perceived as most salient. Alternatively, as a function of its location in correctional services, it might instead be subsumed under some other title

Dimensions of variation in programs

Theoretical model. Programs differ according to the models of crime causation or of individual change on which they are based. Whilst the most successful programs to date involve applications of cognitive/ social-learning models, many other approaches exist and have obtained modest and occasionally larger effect sizes.

Treatment targets (criminogenic needs). It is essential, if programs are to be effective in changing risk of future offending, that they are focused on aspects of individuals' functioning that have been shown to be linked to criminal acts. Programs vary in the number, range, and degree of inter-relatedness of such targets.

Dosage. Programs also vary simply in the numbers and duration of staff-client contacts; in their intensity over time; and in their overall time-scale of delivery. Following the risk principle it would be expected that there will be a correspondence between risk levels and assignment to different degrees of program intensity; but this relationship may not be linear.

Criminal justice setting. The most immediately obvious aspect of this is whether programs are delivered in institutions or in the community. Programs also vary in respect of the kind of agency within which they are run, the point during sentences when programming is carried out, and the amount of access to other services concurrently.

Sentencing context. The nature of the sentence imposed may have a direct influence on program delivery, as it will influence the amount of control in the hands of correctional staff, with potential consequences for the degree of participation by offenders.

Specificity. There are differences between programs in terms of the specificity of their objectives. Whereas some may have a very precise focus on a single problem area (e.g., anger management), others may have very broad objectives and a wide spectrum of treatment targets. Given the findings from large-scale reviews concerning their superior effectiveness, multi-modal programs, using a combination of targets and methods of working, are usually seen as more powerful agents of change.

Program portfolios. Within a single institution there may be a range of program opportunities. Correctional planning principles can then suggest the most appropriate array of programs for an inmate, moving for example from generic, broad-ranging and multi-modal programs to others with more specific treatment targets.

Programs also differ in other respects, for example whether they are designed for delivery on an individual or group basis. Both for reasons of economy and for the other advantages gained from joint activity and collaborative learning, a majority of extant programs are based on a group format.

Target population

Another important issue is that of who should participate in a program. In one sense that may seem obvious: the offender allocated to take part. However, it can be tentatively suggested that the more support individuals have from different aspects of their social environments, the likelier it is that they will achieve change. Some programs, therefore, include significant others as participants.

Safeguarding integrity

Regardless of precisely how programs are defined and their ingredients assembled together, certain issues are now seen as paramount in ensuring that they are properly delivered. Lipsey found marked differences in effectiveness between programs that were thoroughly monitored and those that were not.[7] Moncher and Prinz found that the integrity of delivery of a program has been shown to be vitally important in mental health settings.[8]

Thus, all commentators in this field now acknowledge that it is vital that programs be delivered as planned. Procedures need to be in place to monitor this process, and to furnish feedback to program managers or external consultants. The maintenance of program integrity is known to be dependent on appropriate training of staff, provision of adequate resources, good communication between designers, managers and tutors of programs, availability of supervision, and use of some means of measuring client level of participation and change over time.

Equally, many of these tasks will be facilitated if clearly presented manuals and other associated materials support the program itself. Both the program as a whole and its constituent sessions should have clearly stipulated objectives. This is a foundation for many other aspects of the work: unless staff involved in delivering a program can visualise the required contents of sessions, their mode of delivery is likely to deteriorate. During training, staff should practise delivery and have opportunities to be observed by trainers. There should in addition be a clearly defined set of staff competency criteria to be met by those delivering the program. All of these components are products of the core definition of the program and its objectives by its planners. Whatever the nature of a program, it is crucial that these aspects can be clearly defined, if other aspects of delivery are not to become confused and dysfunctional as a result.

Accreditation process

Informed by the steadily accumulating body of treatment-outcome research in work with offenders, correctional services, in several countries, are seeking to establish well-validated intervention programs together with methods of monitoring their application. The optimal route selected by a number of services is the development of procedures for *accreditation* of programs designed to reduce recidivism.

In addition to program accreditation, each location in correctional services (a prison, probation office, or other unit) must also satisfactorily meet criteria for *site accreditation*. This is part of a process of certifying program and treatment integrity at that site. Systems for collecting monitoring information must be in place, and the data so collected made available for an annual *site audit*. Audit reports are then scrutinised both by correctional agency staff and by members of the independent accreditation panel.

Program implementation and delivery

Several authors have provided valuable guidelines for sensibly directing this process. Reflecting on the general context of installing new programs in organisational settings, Bernfeld, Blase and Fixsen have advocated the adoption of a *multi-level systems perspective*.[9] This entails focusing on four separate but related levels of analysis: *client*; *program*; *organisation*; and *societal*. Programs should not be seen in isolation but as parts of an interactive, dynamic and evolving whole. Using different terminology but addressing essentially the same issues and problems, Harris and Smith have discussed how to implement programmatic developments in community-based correctional services.[10] More recently, Gendreau, Goggin and Smith have forwarded a set of systematised principles for guiding the total process of program implementation.[11] ■

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