

# Classification for correctional programming: The Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) process

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**I**n 1994, the Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) process was implemented in all regions of the Correctional Service of Canada. OIA is a comprehensive and integrated evaluation of the offender at the time of admission to the federal system. It involves the collection and analysis of information on each offender's criminal and mental health history, social situation, education and other factors relevant to determining criminal risk and identifying offender needs.<sup>2</sup> This provides a basis for determining the offender's institutional placement and for establishing his or her correctional plan.

Since implementation, nearly 5,350 full OIAs have been completed and entered into the Offender Management System (OMS). Until recently, only about one third of the institutional population had comprehensive risk/need assessment information derived from OIA. While this information is organized in a systematic fashion and available on OMS, profiling the entire institution population required a case-by-case review of the existing population which has not undergone OIA (stock population). This was accomplished using a streamlined OIA process whereby the bottom-line risk/need rating (criminal risk and case need), a Statistical Information on Recidivism Scale — Revised (SIR-R1).<sup>3</sup> Score and ratings on each of the seven criminogenic need areas (employment, marital/family, associates, substance abuse, community functioning, personal/emotional, attitude) were made available on all inmates.

By assessing the entire federal offender population on admission in a comprehensive, integrated and systematic fashion, the Service can forecast the growth of its prison population, monitor changes in composition, improve risk management procedures and measure correctional performance. This new technology could improve release rates by systematically identifying lower risk inmates earlier in their sentence, thereby reducing the costs of incarceration and providing a more humane response to offenders. Moreover, this approach could also bring about a reduced requirement for higher security and yield useful information for evaluation. This, in turn, has the potential to improve operations and reduce costs for the Service.

## Background

**P**ublic inquiries and internal task forces continue to illuminate the need for improved offender assessment and information sharing among components of the criminal justice system. Consequently, much attention has focused on the

decision-making policies and risk assessment procedures of the Correctional Service of Canada and the National Parole Board.

Under the auspices of the Correctional Strategy Initiative,<sup>4</sup> it had been decided that criminogenic needs should provide the basis for offender programming and that service delivery should focus primarily on successful reintegration into the community. A national working group was established to design and develop a systematic approach to offender assessment on admission to federal corrections. As a result, the Offender Intake Assessment model was developed to standardize an overall orientation and integrated offender risk/needs assessment process throughout the Correctional Service of Canada.

In 1992-93, a pilot test of the process was undertaken in all regions. On the basis of this trial exercise, refinements were made, and later work (1993-94) addressed staff training, the establishment of technological support, and data collection and analysis to measure correctional performance. In November 1994, the Service implemented the OIA process at the following institutions: Matsqui (British Columbia), Edmonton (Alberta), Saskatchewan Penitentiary (Saskatchewan), Stony Mountain (Manitoba), Millhaven (Ontario), Prison for Women (Ontario), Regional Reception Centre (Quebec) and Springhill (Nova Scotia).

Because of both its complexity and its decisive role in shaping the subsequent phases of the offender's sentence, the OIA project demanded a sizable investment of human and fiscal resources from the field as well as from regional and national headquarters.

## The intake assessment process

Beginning at the time of sentence, case management officers (parole officers) co-ordinate the collection of all relevant information (criminal records, police reports, court transcripts, crown briefs, judges' comments, pre-sentence reports, victim impact statements, etc.) from sources within and outside the Correctional Service of Canada. This information provides the basis for all future decisions and recommendations throughout the management of the offender's sentence. On receiving a federal

sentence (two years or more), the offender is interviewed by a case management officer who starts by identifying critical concerns (such as suicide potential, security risk, health). This information is transferred, with the offender, to a federal institution which has a specialized Intake Assessment Unit (formerly reception centre).

A postsentence community investigation is initiated by a case manager (parole officer) located in the community from which the offender came. The nature of relationships with significant others (such as family, peers, employers), the impact of future contacts with the offender, during incarceration or at release, and the degree of support others are prepared to offer the offender on return to the community are of particular interest.

On arrival at an Intake Assessment Unit, an admission interview is completed and an orientation session provided. The initial assessment screens an offender for immediate physical health, security (personal and others' safety), mental health and suicide concerns. Following this, the offender progresses to the two core components of the OIA process: Criminal Risk Assessment and Case Needs Identification and Analysis.

The Criminal Risk Assessment for every offender is based on the criminal history record, the offence severity record, the sex offence history checklist, whether detention criteria are met, the results of the SIR-R1 Scale and any other risk factors as detailed in a criminal profile report. The criminal profile provides details of the crime or crimes for which the offender is currently sentenced.

The Case Needs Identification and Analysis protocol identifies seven need dimensions, including employment, marital/family, associates, substance abuse, community functioning, personal/emotional and attitude. A list of indicators (about 200 in total) and rating guidelines are provided for each criminogenic need area. During assessment, the offender's complete background is considered, including personal characteristics, interpersonal influences, situational determinants and environmental conditions.

Added to the OIA process are psychological evaluations, behavioural observation by unit staff and supplementary assessments (such as education, vocational and substance abuse). All this information is brought together at a case conference attended by a multidisciplinary OIA team.

A summary report for each offender is completed. It includes a bottom-line or overall risk/needs

level ranging from low risk, low need to high risk, high need; a statement on each of seven criminogenic need areas ranging from a "factor seen as an asset to community adjustment" to "no need for improvement" to "some need for improvement" to "considerable need for improvement"; a set of priorities for needs; an estimate of motivation; a custody rating designation ranging from minimum through medium to maximum security; a complete social history; and an institutional placement decision. This comprehensive, integrated assessment package is the basis for a correctional plan for the offender.

### Criminal history background

Table 1 shows a distribution of selected Criminal Risk Assessment indicators by gender for all completed OIAs since implementation. What does this say about the criminal history background of the federal population at admission? The table clearly illustrates considerable previous involvement with the criminal justice system. In fact, roughly nine out of ten males and two out of three females admitted were repeat offenders. Also noteworthy is the finding that nearly one quarter of the male admissions had a sex offence history (current or past). This information allows the Correctional Service of Canada to profile its offender population on the basis of criminal history background which incorporates exposure and response to previous criminal sanctioning.

Table 1

#### Criminal History Background of Federal Admissions

Variable	Male Offenders (5,235)		Female Offenders (114)	
<b>Previous Youth Court</b>	<b>2,077</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>22%</b>
Community supervision	1,435	27%	16	14%
Open custody	1,048	20%	15	13%
Secure custody	1,158	22%	12	11%
<b>Previous Adult Court</b>	<b>4,436</b>	<b>85%</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>57%</b>
Community supervision	3,732	71%	48	42%
Provincial terms	3,687	70%	48	42%
Federal terms	1,672	32%	18	16%
<b>Total (Youth and/or Adult)</b>	<b>4,623</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>63%</b>
<b>Previous:</b>				
Segregation	1,920	37%	20	18%
Escape/UAL	1,270	24%	10	9%
Failure on conditional release	1,916	37%	20	18%
< 6 months since last incarceration	1,219	23%	16	14%
Sex offence history (includes current)	1,194	23%	5	4%

Note: as of August 1996.

**Table 2**

**Relationships (Pearson r's) between OIA Criminal Risk Assessment Components and Other Risk Measures (4,067 offenders)**

	Risk Level	Institutional Adjustment Score	Security Risk Score	SIR-R1 Score
<b>Criminal History Record (any)</b>	.41***	.54***	.28***	-.83***
Previous — youth court	.24***	.44***	.30***	-.48***
Previous — adult court	.37***	.42***	.17***	-.78***
<b>Offence Severity Record</b>	.49***	.26***	.46***	-.29***
<b>Sex Offence History</b>	.17***	-.13***	.00 ns	.20***

Note: \*\*\* p < 0.001; ns = non-significant.

Although sex offence history was positively correlated with the OIA risk level, it correlated negatively with both the institutional adjustment subscale of the custody rating scale and the SIR-R1 Score. Given that sex offenders, as a group, are considerably older than the general prison population and typically have had less exposure to the criminal justice system, this finding is not surprising as these scales are heavily influenced by criminal history.

Another important way to explore the validity of the OIA process is through the relationships between individual need level ratings and the number of indicators endorsed in each of the seven need domains (see Table 3).

For example, level of need for each domain should be positively correlated with the number of indicators (hits) checked off. The correlations in the shaded diagonal represent the extent to which these relationships are consistent and in the expected direction. Outside the diagonal is the extent to which the need areas being assessed are interdependent. As we can see, all the relationships are significant.

Being able to produce an offender risk/needs profile of an entire prison population (taken at admission) can be extremely useful for correctional planning and evaluating progress post-intake. At present, an overall risk/needs level and a statement on each of seven criminogenic need areas is available for federal offenders. (Note: there are a number of OIAs

**Validity**

One way of looking at the validity of the OIA process is to examine the relationships between the various components of OIA — Criminal Risk Assessment and other related risk measures (see Table 2).

The correlations between criminal history record (any, previous — youth court, previous — adult court) and risk level drawn from the OIA process, custody rating subscale scores (institutional adjustment and security risk) and the SIR-R1 Scale were highly significant and in the expected direction. Similarly, the offence severity record converged on these other measures of offender risk.

**Table 3**

**Relationship (r's) between OIA Need Level Ratings and Domain Indicators (5 238 male offenders)**

INDICATORS	NEED LEVEL						
	Employment	Marital/Family	Associates	Substance Abuse	Community Functioning	Personal/Emotional	Attitude
Employment M=10.9 ET=5.6	.60	.20	.32	.28	.39	.24	.20
Marital/Family M=6.9 SD=4.1	.15	.56	.05	.26	.15	.32	.11
Associates M=4.0 SD=2.3	.43	.20	.63	.38	.40	.26	.26
Substance Abuse M=12.0 SD=8.8	.27	.26	.33	.78	.25	.24	.13
Community Functioning M=5.7 SD=3.1	.43	.27	.30	.31	.54	.25	.22
Personal/Emotional M=13.2 SD=7.3	.29	.38	.23	.29	.35	.58	.40
Attitude M=5.6 SD=4.7	.37	.24	.40	.28	.38	.34	.60
<b>TOTAL</b> M=58.1 D=25.8	.49	.42	.40	.57	.46	.46	.39

Note: M = Mean (or average); SD= Standard Deviation; p< 0.001.

under way and incomplete at time of snapshots.)

Table 4 shows a national overview of risk/needs levels for the prison population (taken at time of admission) by gender. As we can see from the distribution of risk/need levels, male offenders are more likely to be assessed higher risk/higher need than female offenders. However, keep in mind that this distribution is based on an institutional population. A recent-admission population would break down differently as it would be composed of offenders serving shorter sentences, with less criminal history and lower risk ratings. The relatively high proportion of higher risk, higher need cases likely reflects an accumulation of longer term offenders (lifers, dangerous offenders) and detention cases. Such cases require a systematic reassessment of risk/needs throughout the period of incarceration.

The OIA process also gathers information on each offender's need ratings. Based on a total prison population snapshot, there is considerable variation across the differing need areas between male offenders and female offenders (see Table 5).

At time of admission, male offenders were more likely to have been experiencing problems in substance abuse and attitude. However, female offenders were more likely to have had difficulties in the area of associates/significant others. There appear to be no statistically meaningful differences between male and female offenders with respect to difficulties in employment, community functioning or personal/emotional orientation. That is, male and female offenders were equally as likely to have been experiencing difficulties in these areas.

### Correctional Plans

The results of OIA are used by case management officers to develop initial correctional plans for the offender. Basically, the Correctional Plan is designed to address the factors identified as contributing to criminal behavior. Like OIA, the Correctional Plan is fully automated on the Offender Management System. It comprises three sections: an overview, a needs analysis and needs and program objectives.

Table 4

#### National Overview of the Federal Institutional Population: Percentage Distribution of Risk/Need Levels (At time of admission)

Risk/Need Level:	Male Offenders		Female Offenders	
	(11,541)		(182)	
Low risk/Low need	506	4.4%	48	26.4%
Low risk/Medium need	490	4.3%	25	13.7%
Low risk/High need	138	1.2%	8	4.4%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>1,134</b>	<b>9.8%</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>44.5%</b>
Medium risk/Low need	213	1.9%	8	4.4%
Medium risk/Medium need	2,340	20.3%	25	13.7%
Medium risk/High need	1,558	13.5%	22	12.1%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>4,111</b>	<b>35.6%</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>30.2%</b>
High risk/Low need	62	0.5%	2	1.1%
High risk/Medium need	976	8.5%	10	5.5%
High risk/High need	5,258	45.6%	34	18.7%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>6,296</b>	<b>54.6%</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>25.3%</b>

Note: as of August, 1996.

For example, the later section could identify a need domain (such as personal/emotional orientation) that has a principal component (such as cognition) and recommend a particular program (such as cognitive skills training).

Priorities must be assigned for each offender's programming needs so interventions can be delivered in a logical fashion. The Correctional Plan is reviewed regularly and revised as criminogenic needs are met or progress made in reducing the level of risk. Moreover, a Correctional Plan ensures that there is continuity in programming between institutions and community.

### Conclusion

The day has arrived where the Correctional Service of Canada can assess offenders at admission in a comprehensive, integrated and systematic fashion and reassess them routinely in the community thereafter. Where are we in our ability to assess risk? We have made some important breakthroughs. What needs to be done next? We need to study how well our correctional plans and interventions work. ■

Table 5

**National Overview of the Federal Institutional Population:  
Percentage Distribution of Case Need Levels (at time of  
admission)**

	Male Offenders		Female Offenders	
	(11,541)		(182)	
<b>Need Level: Domain</b>				
<b>An Asset</b>				
Employment	1,011	8.8%	26	14.3%
Marital/Family	1,060	9.2%	16	8.8%
Associates	915	7.9%	16	8.8%
Substance Abuse	—	—	—	—
Community Functioning	731	6.3%	25	13.7%
Personal/Emotional	—	—	—	—
Attitude	1,006	8.7%	32	17.6%
<b>No Difficulty</b>				
Employment	1,758	15.2%	22	12.1%
Marital/Family	2,905	25.2%	38	20.9%
Associates	2,111	18.3%	19	10.4%
Substance Abuse	2,687	23.3%	69	37.9%
Community Functioning	2,859	24.8%	31	17.0%
Personal/Emotional	1,034	9.0%	22	12.1%
Attitude	2,875	24.9%	96	52.8%
<b>Some Difficulty</b>				
Employment	4,350	37.7%	89	48.9%
Marital/Family	3,963	34.3%	86	47.3%
Associates	4,535	39.3%	116	63.7%
Substance Abuse	2,317	20.1%	43	23.6%
Community Functioning	5,229	45.3%	107	58.8%
Personal/Emotional	3,215	27.9%	95	52.2%
Attitude	3,321	28.8%	38	20.9%
<b>Considerable Difficulty</b>				
Employment	4,422	38.3%	45	24.7%
Marital/Family	3,613	31.3%	42	23.1%
Associates	3,980	34.5%	31	17.0%
Substance Abuse	6,537	56.6%	70	38.5%
Community Functioning	2,722	23.6%	19	10.4%
Personal/Emotional	7,292	63.2%	65	35.7%
Attitude	4,339	37.6%	16	8.8%

Note: as of August, 1996.

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<sup>2</sup> L. L. Motiuk, "Where Are We in Our Ability to Assess Risk?" *Forum on Corrections Research*, 5, 2 (1993): 14-21.

<sup>3</sup> Correctional Service of Canada, *Revised Statistical Information on Recidivism Scale (SIR-R1)* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Correctional Service of Canada, *The Correctional Strategy* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1992).