



Research Summary



STRENGTHS AND HUMAN NEEDS IN OFFENDER REHABILITATION

Question: What is the role played by strengths and basic human needs in the rehabilitation of offenders?

Background: Discussions about the rehabilitation of offenders often centre on the factors that place offenders at risk for criminal behaviour. One of the major models for the assessment and treatment of offenders highlights the importance of identifying the offender's risk, the needs that are criminogenic, and then matching the intensity of services to the offender's risk level and making sure that the services target their criminogenic needs. This model is referred to as the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model (see Research Summary Volume 12, No. 6, 2007).

Recently the RNR model has been criticized for over-emphasizing offender risk factors at the expense of helping offenders meet their basic human needs and live a more fulfilling life. Critics have argued that the goals of the correctional system are heavily weighted to the reduction of risk factors and not enough attention is given to a more positive and strength-based approach to the rehabilitation of offenders.

Answer: The original statement of the RNR model focused on three main principles. The Risk principle described who could benefit the most from treatment (the medium to higher risk offenders). The Need principle

talked about what should be treated (i.e., criminogenic needs) and the Responsivity principle outlined how treatment should be delivered (e.g., use cognitive-behavioural techniques).

Since the original formulation of the RNR model in 1990, new research on offender rehabilitation has led to the expansion of the model to include many more principles. Although the principles of Risk, Need and Responsivity remain at the core, a number of new principles and clarification of the original principles counter many of the criticisms of the RNR model.

One deficiency raised is that the RNR model ignores motivations to fulfill such basic human needs as competency and self-determination. However, one subcomponent of the Responsivity principle, referred to as "Specific Responsivity", emphasizes the importance of motivation and makes suggestions on how to enhance offender motivation in treatment programming. This is very important because high risk offenders are particularly difficult to engage in treatment regardless of what the treatment targets.

One of the newer principles in the RNR model is to assess personal strengths and integrate them into rehabilitation efforts. Treatment can build upon a person's prosocial strengths and in so doing enhance

motivation and engagement in treatment. The consequence is a reduction in risk. The RNR model is not just about risk. It is also a strength-based approach to helping offenders.

Criminogenic needs are related to criminal behaviour (e.g., substance abuse, unemployment) whereas noncriminogenic needs are minimally related to criminal behaviour. For example, poor self-esteem and feeling unhappy are largely unrelated to criminal conduct. The RNR model does not ignore these noncriminogenic needs but reminds us that it is addressing criminogenic needs that have been demonstrated to reduce recidivism. Addressing noncriminogenic factors becomes important when it interferes with the effective targeting of criminogenic needs (e.g., an offender is so depressed that motivation to participate in the treatment of criminogenic needs is compromised).

Policy Implications:

1. When developing programs and policies the expanded RNR model should be considered and not simply the three principles derived in the 1990 version of the model.
2. The assessment of offenders for treatment purposes should integrate the assessment of strengths and motivations. In this way, treatment providers can build upon personal strengths in their efforts to decrease program attrition and reduce offender risk.
3. Basic human needs and aspirations are important elements to engagement and success in offender treatment. One of the principles of the expanded RNR model is respect for the person. However, one must not lose sight of addressing criminogenic needs. It is by reducing criminogenic needs that offenders are helped to lead a more prosocial lifestyle.

Source: D. A. Andrews, D. A., Bonta, J., & Wormith, S. J. (2011). The Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) Model: Does adding the Good Lives model contribute to effective crime prevention? *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 38, 735-755.

For further information:

James Bonta, Ph.D.
Corrections Research
Public Safety Canada
340 Laurier Avenue West
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P8
Phone: 613-991-2831 Fax: 613-990-8295
E-mail: Jim.Bonta@ps.gc.ca

Also available on Public Safety Canada's website at: www.PublicSafety.gc.ca