

The Canadian model of offender intake assessment and referrals to education programs in Canadian federal penitentiaries

Doris Fortin
Acting Director
Institutional Reintegration Operations
Correctional Service, Canada

Offender intake assessment

"An accurate assessment facilitates the fair, efficient and ethical classification of offenders" (Bonta, 2000). An accurate assessment also guides the determination of treatment targets that will impact on the risk of re-offending.

In 1994, The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) implemented a comprehensive evaluation framework for federal offenders (sentences to 2 years and above to be served in a federal penitentiaries) to be completed at admission. This assessment not only serves for the appropriate security classification of offenders (low, medium or high) but also serves to predict through the use of actuarial tools (Statistical Information on Recidivism, Custody Rating Scale) future risk of recidivism based on static factors and treatment needs based on dynamic factors (Motiuk, 1997).

For the purpose of this discussion, we are going to focus our attention on the assessment of the dynamic factors or in other words the criminogenic needs of federally sentenced offenders in Canada. The assessment is applied for all offenders including males, male aboriginals, female and female aboriginals, as well as offenders from other ethnic groups.

The first step involves the collection of all relevant information about the offender: criminal records, police reports, court transcripts, crown briefs, judges' comments, pre-sentence reports, victim impact statements, etc. This exhaustive task falls to the parole officers assigned at intake. The information will then serve for all future planning of the case as well as decision-making. A community investigation is also initiated at this stage in order to collect information on the nature of the offenders relationships with significant others and the degree of support others are willing to offer the offender during his/her incarceration and after release. This is in order to better prepare the offender for community reintegration.

While the criminal risk assessment of offenders is based on criminal history, the case needs identification identifies seven need dimensions:

- Employment and education
- Marital/family relationships
- Associates
- Substance abuse
- Community functioning
- Personal/emotional orientation

- Attitude

For the determination of the needs of each offender, and the prioritisation of those needs, supplementary evaluations are conducted such as spousal assault risk assessment, substance abuse behaviours, specialised sex offender assessment, educational and vocational testing to determine level of literacy and work competency of offenders.

This comprehensive evaluation will form the basis for the development of a correctional plan (treatment plan) for each offender for the duration of the period of incarceration as well as insight for the period of supervision following release. "A well-developed Correctional Plan should be in reality the most important document that a correctional jurisdiction produces on an offender" (Taylor, 2001).

Since the late 80s and early 90s, CSC has designed numerous reintegration programs to address the multiple needs of offenders in its efforts to target and reduce rates of re-offending of offenders. More recently, the CSC has been attempting to better categorise the different types of intervention available to offenders both in the institution and the community to better focus resources on those interventions that directly impact on criminal recidivism.

CSC's reintegration programs have been categorised in the following manner:

Correctional programs are interventions that are structured and target criminogenic needs, i.e. factors linked directly to criminal activity.

Mental health programs are aimed at symptom reduction of offenders with mental health issues, however, there is an overlap with factors linked to criminal activity.

Educational programs consist of interventions aimed at increasing offenders literacy level and mathematical skills.

Employability programs strive to provide offenders with marketable skills.

Social programs provide opportunities for the transfer of skills learned in other correctional interventions such as correctional programs.

You will notice that education and employability programs have been defined in a category of their own.

Based on the needs of the offender as identified by the parole officer through the case needs identification, referrals will be made to different interventions. Referrals to correctional programs are made on the basis of the principles of risk, need and responsivity.

The risk principle has been defined to mean that the "higher-risk cases benefit from more intervention; while the lower-risk cases benefit most from low or no interventions" (Taylor, 2001).

The need principle refers to the idea that "the greatest reductions in recidivism are attained by targeting criminogenic needs" (Taylor, 2001).

The responsivity principle, the principle that has received the least attention in research but that is proving to impact directly on treatment outcomes, refers to the approaches that are the most efficient when they are adapted to offenders' abilities and learning styles. Responsivity

issues are particularly relevant for interventions designed for women, aboriginal offenders, offenders from other non Western ethnic groups, lower functioning offenders, offenders with learning disabilities, etc.

Correctional programs available in the Canadian institutions and the community target need areas in:

- Sex related offences
- Family violence
- Violence prevention
- Substance abuse
- Basis living skills
- Emotion management
- Beliefs, attitudes and values
- Maintenance and follow up programs

In most of the categories, programs designed for specific client groups have been designed: i.e. women and aboriginal offenders.

All offenders are assessed at admission for level of education and vocational needs or interests.

On admission offenders are asked to complete achievement tests to assess language (reading and writing) and mathematical skills (Canadian Adult Achievement Test). From the mid-eighties to the mid-nineties, offenders who scored below a grade 8 level were offered the opportunity to enrol in the Adult Basic Education (ABE) Program. From the mid-nineties to more recently offenders were strongly encouraged to participate in the ABE program if they scored below grade 10 level. Currently, CSC encourages offenders to involve themselves in the ABE program if they score below the grade 12 level.

Education programs

Criminal offenders in Canada "rate amongst the most poorly educated citizen" (Stevens, 2001). Two out of three offenders have not completed high school and one third have not attained a grade 8 level.

In Canadian Corrections, the role of education encompasses more than the primary purpose of learning and academic progress. Education:

Relieves the boredom of prison time;
Gives student-inmates a better understanding of society;
Gives non-custody professionals an opportunity to monitor correctional operations;
Keeps offenders busy with positive pursuits;
Gives inmates an opportunity to experience values of a law-abiding individual (the teacher);
Alters behaviour thus preventing costly reincarceration. (Stevens, 2001)

Policy on education programs for federal inmates

The Correctional Service of Canada has enforced a set of policies to ensure that offenders' chances of successful and safe reintegration into Canadian communities are increased by providing minimal education. The enforcement of policies is based on research conducted in this area that demonstrates the positive impact of education on offender populations.

All federal correctional institutions offer basic education programs to enable offenders to complete a high school degree which represents 12 grades of basic education. Institutions also offer programs to help offenders with learning disabilities.

Learning disabilities

Teachers in Canadian Correctional facilities had been requesting help with the diagnosis and treatment of their students with Learning Disabilities for many years. CSC therefore provided training to its teachers through initiatives with the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, and in 2001-2002 successfully created the pilot project, Learning Strategy Classroom Program (LSCP).

The purpose of the LSCP is to assist offenders to develop learning strategies which will allow them be more successful in programs, education, and employment. The goal is to find strategies, in the shortest amount of time possible, which fosters maximum participation within the institution whether in programs, education, or employment. CSC Intake has begun flagging at-risk LD offenders in order to increase the awareness of decision makers that an offender with LD may require LSCP intervention to be truly successful as they progress through their Correctional Plan.

Impact of education programs on recidivism for federal inmates

"Obviously offenders who participate in ABE increase their language and mathematical skills - an advantage that Canadians believe every member of society should possess. However, an important question remains: what contribution does ABE make in enhancing the quality and the likelihood of successful reintegration in the community?" (Porporino & Robinson, 1992)

At any one time, 15% of the federal inmate population in Canada (approximately 23,000 offenders, 60% of which are incarcerated) are involved in an ABE program. CSC has completed research on the effects of adult education on recidivism. There is also other literature available in support of the positive impact of education on recidivism.

In 1992, CSC conducted a research to question the effectiveness of ABE. A large follow up study was done on ABE participants who were conditionally released to determine whether or not program completion was related to subsequent readmissions.

The group fell into three samples: completion of a grade 8 equivalent; release before completion, and withdrawal before completion.

The poorest outcomes were associated with those offenders who withdrew without completing a grade 8 equivalent.

30% ABE completers had readmissions, while 35% of those released prior to completion had readmissions and 41% of those who had withdrawn.

The study also looked at the characteristics of those offenders who benefited the most from the ABE program. And they consisted of those offenders with the highest risk, those serving longer sentences, those who have served more than one federal sentence, violent offenders and younger offenders.

Conclusion

Educational Programming in Canadian corrections is quite optimistic. It suggests that there is support for the beneficial effects of educational upgrading on recidivism. Also, Canadians believe that education is an "efficient agent of social change" (Stevens, 2001). Offering inmates who want to change the opportunity for education can provide an opportunity to advance themselves and to support a successful reintegration.