

## CORRECTIONS RESEARCH IN CANADA: TAKING STOCK

**Question:** What have been the most significant developments in corrections research in Canada during the past twenty years?

**Answer:** In the past two decades there has been an enormous amount of research in the area of corrections with the most significant achievements in the areas of offender assessment and rehabilitation. This body of research has had a major impact in shaping policy and practice in corrections in Canada. This is evident, for example, in the central role of risk assessment and rehabilitation in law (the Corrections and Conditional Release Act) and the elaborate assessment and treatment strategies adopted by the Correctional Service of Canada.

Offender assessment and rehabilitation form the basis of effective corrections. When offender risk and needs are assessed accurately and appropriate treatment programs are provided, offenders, correctional staff, and the community at large all benefit. Research on offender risk assessment has flourished in Canada. This research has produced a number of empirically-based risk scales. Some of

these risk scales are not based on theory and consist mostly of criminal history items, e.g., the Statistical Information on Recidivism or SIR scale. A limitation of risk scales such as the SIR, is that the items are *static* and therefore cannot inform correctional staff what might be changed to decrease an offender's risk level. The development of *dynamic* risk instruments that assess areas of offender needs related to criminal behaviour, such as the Level of Service Inventory (LSI-R) and the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale, represent a significant advancement in offender assessment.

Research in the assessment of special subgroups of offenders is at various stages in development. The validation of risk assessment scales for female and Aboriginal offenders has only recently begun. For example, modifications to Manitoba's risk-needs classification system have demonstrated predictive validity for Aboriginal probationers, and the LSI-R has demonstrated predictive validity for both Aboriginal offenders and female inmates.

There have also been significant developments in the assessment of offender

risk among mentally disordered and sexual offenders. The Violence Risk Appraisal Guide (VRAG) has shown impressive predictive validity for violent re-offending among mentally disordered offenders, and the Historical, Clinical and Risk Management Scale (HCR-20) offers a promising integration of clinical and actuarial information. On the sex offender assessment front, the Rapid Risk Assessment for Sexual Offense Recidivism (RRASOR), has been developed and further research on dynamic risk factors is under way.

The Psychopathy Checklist – Revised (PCL-R) has become the standard for the diagnosis of psychopathy. It has also shown impressive validity with respect to the prediction of violent behaviour.

The research on the cognitive-behavioural treatment of offenders has led to wide acceptance of this approach as the preferred method for treating offenders. Reviews of the offender rehabilitation literature that examine the effect of interventions over a large number of studies have further

reinforced the conclusion that treatment can “work.” Theories that explain criminal behaviour as the result of learning within a social context provide the rationale for cognitive-behavioural interventions. Moreover, this theoretical conceptualisation of criminal behaviour integrates theory with both assessment and treatment. Evaluations of offender treatment programs have strengthened the relevance of a social learning perspective of criminal behaviour.

Notwithstanding the advancement in offender assessment, the present risk instruments can be improved upon to make fewer classification errors. Further research on assessment instruments for female and Aboriginal offenders is required. The assessment of dynamic risk factors forms an important bridge between assessment and effective rehabilitation, and researchers are continuing to explore this connection in various contexts.

**Source:** Bonta, J. and Cormier, R.B. (1999). Corrections research in Canada: Impressive progress and promising prospects, *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, 41, 235-247.

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