CHANGING OFFENDING BEHAVIOUR:
THE VIOLENT OFFENDERS’ TREATMENT PROGRAM

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1.0 Introduction

Correctional treatment programs are designed to reduce the criminal behaviour of offenders. In the last decade of this century, there has been a worldwide resurgence in correctional treatment programs. This has taken place in a background of literature which attests to the effectiveness of such programs. The Violent Offenders Treatment Program (VOTP) consists of a research and development program which will provide the Ministry of Justice with:

1. an evaluated risk assessment procedure
2. an evaluated needs assessment procedure
3. an evaluated treatment program for violent offenders
4. evidence on the value of linking risk and need to the treatment of violent offenders.

The evaluation strategies are based on the following research hypotheses:

1. intervention strategies for violent offenders result in greater efficacy if directed at high risk offenders than medium or low risk offenders; and

2. intervention strategies for violent offenders result in greater efficacy when based on a comprehensive needs assessment than when not based on a needs assessment.

2.0 The Background to the Project

One of the enduring perceptions of penologists since the late 1970s has been that prisons are in a state of "crisis". Indeed so enduring has this perception been that one author has questioned the use of the term crisis for a state of affairs that has existed for over twenty years (Cavadino, 1992). None-the-less references to crises continue to be made, for example Cullen et al (1993) state "(C)orrections, then, has experienced an ideological crisis" (p. 72). Correctional treatment has been and still is part of this crisis. Indeed, it is arguably the central issue.

The crisis reached its peak after Martinson (1974) came to the conclusion that correctional treatment effects could not be found - that nothing works in offender rehabilitation. At that time, many people considered rehabilitation to be the major aim of imprisonment. With the pessimistic evaluation by Martinson, rehabilitation as a purpose for prisons became increasingly less popular. According to Cullen and Gendreau (1988) "nothing works" became a doctrine of penology to be embraced by both conservatives and liberals. The conservatives felt that not enough retribution was being exacted while the liberals were concerned about the injustices that were perpetuated in the name of treatment (for example, indeterminate sentences and enforced treatment). There is considerable argument about whether reformative penal policies were ever genuinely put into practice (Garland, 1985) and more argument about the "failure" of rehabilitation (DiIulio, 1991; Cullen and Gendreau, 1988). Not withstanding this, there is no doubt that there was a significant shift away from the rehabilitation ideology to alternative models.
"Nothing works" led to a resurgence of retributivist criminal justice models (Braithwaite and Pettit, 1990; Hagan 1990). Braithwaite and Pettit argue that retributivism has provided a new justification for the maintenance of punishment as the "pre-eminent response to crime" (Braithwaite and Pettit 1990, p. 6). Cullen and Gendreau (1988) point out that this shift to retribution was consistent with a return to law and order, "get tough" and "war on crime" policies of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Indeed, Cavadino (1994) refers to this period as being influenced by the "law and order" ideology. Garland (1990) suggests that the major frameworks have been the justice model, humane containment, selective incapacitation, modified rehabilitation and even abolitionism. Cragg (1992, p. 5) notes that these frameworks provide "little guidance on how those sentenced to imprisonment should spend their time".

Another factor influencing the development of the treatment of offenders was the perspective of sociologists who viewed crime in a large social picture. The "academic" picture of crime since the demise of rehabilitation has been dominated by sociologists who tended to view individual perspectives as being without foundation or even worse, as maintaining a corrupt justice system. Many criminologists have argued that crime is best understood as a consequence of social structure. Within this perspective, individual explanation or treatment has been given little coverage. Andrews and Bonta (1994) propose that the anti-individualism of many criminologists has held back the development of sound criminal intervention strategies. It is fair to say that in the academic world of crime, the psychological perspective is gaining much greater credibility much of it at the expense of the process theories.

Notwithstanding the "demise" of rehabilitation and the rise of "law and order" ideology, there is no doubt that correctional programs are flourishing in most modern prison systems. These are now a common element in all Australian jurisdictions and appear to be more firmly part of these systems than ever. The resilience of treatment may be attributed to three important factors: first, there is pervasive and consistent evidence that the general public expects and supports correctional treatment (Cullen, Skovron, Scott & Burton, 1990; Indermaur, 1987); second, there is evidence that some treatment programs are effective (Cullen and Gendreau, 1988); and, third, most managers of prisons recognise that treatment programs make good managerial sense (Cullen, Latessa, Burton, & Lombardo, 1993; DiIulio, 1987).

It is no doubt premature to suggest that treatment is becoming the "pre-eminent" management philosophy of prisons. However, the increasing use of correctional treatment does indicate not just a resurgence but a very strong commitment to it. If this is to continue it behoves those concerned with correctional treatment to ensure that cost effective programs are delivered. If treatment is carried without commitment to evaluation then the "nothing works" philosophy will not be overturned. This project is part of the processes of establishing a body of knowledge on the components of effective correctional treatment.

The characteristics of effective and ineffective interventions for violent offending have been recently described by Howells (1996). He suggests that effective programs:
1. have clear links to a theoretical and empirical base. Interventions which are atheoretical or based on "common-sense" are likely to founder. The theoretical base derived from the work of Novaco (Novaco and Welsh, 1989; Novaco, 1993,1994) has remained the most promising for program design. Interventions based on the Novaco model have produced encouraging results (Levey and Howells, 1990). The Novaco model already provides the basis for the STAC program, currently managed by the Ministry of Justice;

2. are based on systematic, detailed needs assessments and formulations of individual violent offenders. Routine allocation of any violent offenders to a common intervention "package" is likely to be counter-productive and wasteful of resources. Interventions should be tailored to a needs assessment for individual offenders. The individual analysis/formulation should specify which violent behaviours have occurred. Environmental, cognitive and psychological factors involved in the development and maintenance of the violence should be identified. This analysis should form the basis of all interventions. "Rehabilitation" attempts should be governed by required changes in behaviour; outcome measures of improvement also should be stated. A "needs assessment" would also form the basis for statements about future risk;

3. would address cultural aspects of violence. Program contents should be adapted to the perceptions and special needs of members of cultural groups. (NB Such an adaptation has already been achieved with the current Ministry of Justice Alternatives to Violence Program); and

4. would target offenders with serious violent behaviour. "Violent behaviour seriousness" has two components: (a) previous frequency of violent offending and (b) degree of harm in the violent offence. Diversion of resources to interventions with offenders who have a low-probability of reoffending is likely to be cost-ineffective. Offenders whose behaviour involves innocuous harm/injury also remain low priority for resource allocation.

These principles are consistent with those suggested by Andrews et al (1990) as being necessary for effective treatment services in correctional settings. These principles are: risk, need and responsivity.

1. Risk: high-risk cases should receive the most services. According to Andrews et al (1990) most benefit is derived if people at highest risk (including risk of re-offending and consequences of re-offending) are treated. The VOTP project will focus on high-risk violent offenders.

2. Need: criminogenic needs should be addressed as areas for change: "The most promising intermediate targets include changing antisocial attitudes, feeling, and peer associations; promoting familial affection ; promoting identification with anticalm role models; increasing self-control and self-management skills; replacing the skills of lying, stealing and aggression with other, more prosocial skills; reducing chemical dependencies; and generally shifting the density of rewards and costs for criminal and noncriminal activities in familial, academic, vocational, and other behavioural settings" (Andrews et al, 1990).
3. Responsivity: the need to match service strategies with the learning styles of the offender.

For intervention strategies to be effective, the three principles of risk, need and responsivity should be achieved. This project is based on these three principles, but goes further by evaluating them over a substantial treatment program.

3.0 Developments To Date

3.1 Risk Assessment

The research findings consistently indicate that treatment should be offered to high risk offenders (Gendreau and Goggin 1996 a&b; Andrews et al 1990a; Andrews 1995; Maguire and Priestly 1995; Gendreau 1996; Howells, Watt, Hall and Baldwin, 1997). Low risk offenders have often been the subjects for intervention because they represent a “safe bet” in as much as they are not likely to reoffend. However, the research suggests that these offenders gain little from intervention and should be left alone. Indeed, research by Gendreau et al (1996) suggest that treatment programs may be counter-productive. High risk offenders are those which are not only more likely to reoffend, but the consequence of their reoffending are likely to be very serious for their victims. Although the treatment gains may be modest with high risk offenders, the overall benefit to the community is greater when compared to the treatment of low risk offenders.

Gendreau, Goggin and Little (1996) report on a substantial meta-analysis of 31 studies of recidivism. As they note, it has been traditionally held that the best predictors of risk are those which are static in nature. These are essentially age and criminal history. Criminal history includes the age of onset of offending and the nature and frequency of offending. Family variables such as criminality and structure have also found to be consistent predictors.

One important observation from Gendreau et al (1996) is that dynamic factors can contribute to the success of prediction. Dynamic factors are those which can change over time and are thus the potential targets for intervention. Gendreau et al (1996) suggest that the following dynamic predictors should be included in a risk assessment:

- antisocial personality
- companions
- criminogenic needs
- interpersonal conflict
- social achievement
- substance abuse

As with previous risk studies they found that intellectual functioning, socio-economic status and level of personal distress were poor indicators of recidivism.

Overall, their recommendation is that risk assessment should include a combination of both static and dynamic factors. They suggest that the Level Of Service Inventory (LSI-R) produces the best assessment of risk.
A more practical approach is recommended here. Firstly, risk assessment on the static predictors should be used as a first level assessment. Elevated risk is indicated in those who commit a serious offence against the person and/or in those who have a long history of criminal behaviour. This is a straightforward actuarial approach which is simple and therefore cost-effective to operate. Such a process would rule out immediately, those who represent a very low risk. A simple risk assessment process based on a linear additive model has been developed for the project. The model is consistent with previous research and thus may be said to have a degree of concurrent validity. However, further validation and reliability assessment is required.

Those offenders who represent a moderate or high level of risk should then be further assessed using a criminogenic needs analysis.

3.2 Criminogenic Need

Research outcomes have indicated the importance of sound assessment prior to intervention. The assessment should be of criminogenic need (Andrews et al. 1990a; Andrews 1995; Gendreau et al. 1996) and should be individualised giving an understanding of each client’s criminality (Andrews 1995; Howells, 1996). This allows for the development of individualised treatment plans.

For all that the evidence points to the importance of the assessment of criminogenic need, there is no clear and simple model which outlines this process for practitioners. Andrews (1995) has identified a number of “promising intermediate targets for treatment” including for example, changing anti-social attitudes and feelings; increasing self control and problem solving skills; reducing substance abuse; enabling the client to identify and manage risky situations for them; and shifting the densities of rewards and costs for criminal and non-criminal activities. However, a comprehensive model is still not available in the literature.

In view of the paucity of pragmatic assessment we have developed a model of criminogenic need assessment based on 6 internal factors and 2 external factors. This model has been used in the need assessment of violent offenders in Casuarina prison. The internal factors are

- Personality (impulsivity and lack of empathy).
- Cognitions (the justifications and rationalisations offenders use for their criminal behaviour moral development; and criminal values and sentiments).
- Appraisals (particularly the attribution of hostile intent).
- Arousal (the emotional components of offending).
- Skills (including interpersonal skills and problem solving).
- Psychopathology (which identifies the relationship between a person’s offending and any psychopathology particularly paranoid belief systems and brain damage).

The external factors are

- Inhibitors (particularly non-criminal peers; employment; and family).
- Disinhibitors (particularly the relationship between substance misuse and crime; and criminal peers).
Detailed descriptions and justifications of these factors is now available. In addition, a preliminary criminogenic needs assessment procedure has been developed. This has yet to be tested for reliability or validity.

3.3 General Needs Assessment

In addition to the criminogenic needs, we recognised the importance of “general needs”. Baldwin (1986) notes that these needs are shared by all clients universal by virtue of their existence (Baldwin, 1986). One way of viewing criminogenic need and general need is as follows. Offenders have certain attributes which are directly related to their offending. If offending is going to cease then these criminogenic needs must be serviced. Thus successful intervention must first start by addressing the criminogenic factors. However, this process is akin to “wiping the slate clean”. That is, the characteristics which contribute to offending have been the subject of intervention. In addition to this, the task is to address the needs which will help the individual cope as effectively as possible in his/her non-criminal existence. To this end, we have developed a general needs assessment which has been pilot tested along with the criminogenic needs. The following areas of general needs have been identified:

- Education
- Health
- Accommodation
- Relationships
- Mobility
- Employment
- Recreation

3.4 Treatment Program

Based on the above needs analyses the outline of a treatment program has been devised. The program is 22 weeks long comprising 3 days of 6 hours each comprising a total of nearly 400 hours. This more than adequately meets Lipsey’s recommendation for the minimum number of hours intervention for an effective program.

The program makes use of behavioural and social learning principles aimed at changing or enhancing skills, arousal and cognitions. These techniques have been identified by Andrews and Gendreau (Andrews, 1995; Andrews et al 1990a; Andrews and Bonta, 1994; Gendreau, 1996; Gendreau and Goggin 1996a; Gendreau and Goggin 1996b) amongst other, as being the most effective intervention techniques.

The program details will be developed over the next six months as the intervention progresses.

The program is being evaluated against a no treatment control. The treatment and no-treatment control have been randomly allocated from a group of prisoners who were matched for high risk. The following measures of both groups of have been included:

- Anger Management Skills - knowledge questionnaire
Karolinska Scales of Personality - indirect aggression, verbal aggression, irritability, suspicion, guilt, inhibition of aggression
State Trait Anger Expression Scale - Trait Anger
Modified Overt Aggression Scale - Prison Officer observation
Incident reports

This will allow for a preliminary analysis of the effectiveness of the program.

4.0 Conclusion

The six months of the program has been one of development and pilot testing. Further evaluation of the risk assessment and criminogenic and general needs assessment protocols need to be undertaken before we can be confident with their use. The treatment program itself is progressing satisfactorily. Overall, progress to date has been surprisingly good.

One key factor which has not been addressed above is the role of the host organisation. The literature on effectiveness attests to the importance of commitment and involvement by staff in the host organisation. We are confident that the progress to date would not have been achieved without the support of the Manager of the Alternative To Violence unit and the Superintendent of Casuarina Prison. What is remarkable about this project is the willingness of the Ministry of Justice to dedicate substantial resources to the development of an evaluated treatment program. This dedication has been lead by the Manager of the Alternatives to Violence Unit. In addition, the Superintendent of Casuarina Prison has provided material support throughout the project. This level of support is just as significant as the knowledge and skills of the research and development team.

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References


