What are Criminogenic Needs and Why are they Important?

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Over the years, a great deal of research has been conducted on offenders, correctional sanctions, and correctional programs—literally hundreds of studies have tried to better identify the risk factors correlated with criminal conduct. Sifting through and reading this literature is a daunting challenge, but fortunately quite a bit of research has been done not only to identify risk factors, but also to determine which are the strongest. Research by Andrews, Bonta, Gendreau and others have identified six major risk factors associated with criminal conduct: antisocial/procriminal attitudes, values, and beliefs; procriminal associates; temperament and personality factors; a history of antisocial behavior; family factors; and low levels of educational, vocational or financial achievement.

If we look carefully at these areas we can see that some can be influenced or changed while others cannot. Those that cannot be changed are called "static." Examples include prior record or family criminality. Early onset of criminal behavior is a very good predictor of future behavior, and it is a risk factor that cannot be changed: if you were first arrested at age ten you will always have been first arrested at age ten. Similarly, if your father is in prison it may help explain why you are in trouble (i.e. social learning), but the fact that your father is in prison cannot be changed.

Those factors that can be changed are called "dynamic." They include factors like who an offender hangs around with, offenders' attitudes and values, their lack of problem solving skills, their substance use, and their employment status. All these are correlated with recidivism, and all can be targeted for change. These dynamic factors are also called *criminogenic needs*: crime producing factors that are strongly correlated with risk.

We can compare this to the risk factors associated with having a heart attack. Your risk can be heightened by your age (over 50), sex (males), family history of heart problems, high blood pressure, being overweight, lack of exercise, stress, smoking, and high cholesterol. Some of these factors are static and others are dynamic. To *understand* your risk you would factor in all of them; to *affect*—and lower—your risk you would focus on the dynamic ones.

Applying the same logic to effective correctional intervention we come up with the need principle as a way to choose the "what" to target for change in an offender—namely, dynamic factors or criminogenic needs that are highly correlated with criminal conduct. Programs should assess and target crime producing needs, such as anti-social attitudes, anti-social peer associations, substance abuse, lack of empathy, lack of problem solving and self-control skills, and other factors that are highly correlated with criminal conduct. Furthermore, programs need to ensure that the vast majority of their interventions are focused on these factors.

Such a focus produces results. **Figure 1** (right) shows the result from a "meta analysis"—a quantitative review of multiple studies that combines their data. Programs that concentrate more on non-criminogenic areas have small to slightly negative effects (i.e. they may slightly *increase* recidivism!), while programs that target at least four to six criminogenic needs can reduce recidivism by 30 percent.

It is important to note that most offenders are not high risk for recidivism because they have one risk or need factor, but rather are high risk because they have multiple risk and need factors. Programs that target only one such need may not produce the desired effects. For example, while unemployment is correlated with criminal conduct for many probationers and parolees, by itself it is not that strong of a risk factor. After all, if most of us were unemployed we would not start selling drugs or robbing people; we would simply start looking for another job. But if you think work is for someone else, if you have no problem letting someone else support you, or if you think you can make more in a day illegitimately than someone can make in a month legiti-

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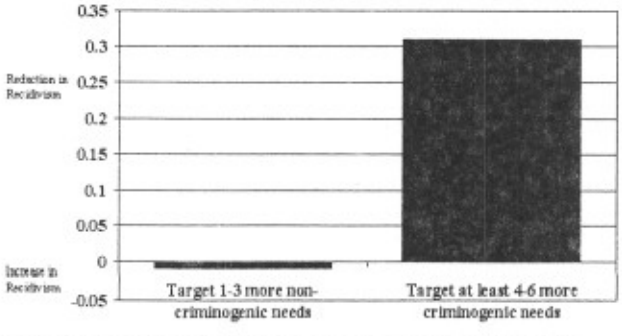
Figure 1
Targeting Criminogenic Need: Results from Meta-Analyses



Source: Gendreau, P., French, S.A., and A. Taylor (2002). What Works (What Doesn't Work) Revised 2002. Invited Submission to the International Community Corrections Association Monograph Series Project.

mately, then being unemployed does add considerably to your risk of offending. Successful programs must address clusters of criminogenic needs that work together.

It is also important to remember that non-criminogenic factors such as self-esteem, fear of punishment, physical conditioning, understanding one's culture or history, and creative abilities will not have much effect on recidivism rates. Unfortunately, there are a lot of programs out there that target non-criminogenic needs and as a result do not produce much effect on recidivism. Studies have shown that programs that target four to six *more criminogenic* risk factors than non-criminogenic risk factors can have a thirty percent or more effect on recidivism. On the other hand, programs that target *more non-criminogenic* risk factors have virtually no effect.

Remember, "what" you target for change is important, as is the density of those targets around crime producing needs.