

Evidence-Based Practice in Corrections:

Entry Points for Improvement in Case-Based Decisions

By Ralph C. Serin, Renée Gobeil, Laura J. Hanby and Caleb D. Lloyd

It is virtually impossible to review current correctional policy or practice guidelines without seeing the term “evidence-based practice” (EBP) prominently displayed. EBP is the body of research and replicable clinical knowledge that describes state-of-the-art correctional assessment, programming and supervision strategies leading to improved correctional outcomes such as the rehabilitation of offenders and increased public safety.¹ As such, it has become the mantra for correctional agencies that wish to indicate that they provide contemporary and effective services. As a caution, it is one thing to say one follows EBP but it is another to demonstrate this; quality assurance reviews with the Correctional Program Assessment Inventory suggest correctional agencies are more optimistic about their claims than is independently the case.² Nonetheless, correctional agencies have made considerable strides regarding practice and this is reflected in reductions in recidivism through both improved programming models³ and training in core correctional practice.⁴ This paper attempts to extend this encouraging work by highlighting several examples of new research that should augment existing EBP by providing refinements in terms of theory, assessment and case supervision that will lead to improved decisions at the individual case level.

Since 2003, the Criminal Justice Decision-Making Laboratory at Carleton University has pursued a program of research intended to inform decisions regarding individual offenders. For example, if two offenders commit the same crime, get the same prison sentence and have the same statistical risk score, do they warrant the same decision regarding release

on parole? Alternatively, if a particular substance abuse program reduces reoffending by 15 percent, how does one know if the program works for a specific offender? Also, are there factors that can change quite rapidly (both positive and negative) that might influence community supervi-

sion practices? Answers to these questions form the basis for this paper. Specifically, the authors will briefly describe three related but independent streams of research — structured (parole) decision-making, reentry and crime desistance and dynamic risk assessment.

Figure 1. Entry Points for Enhancing Case-Based Decision-Making

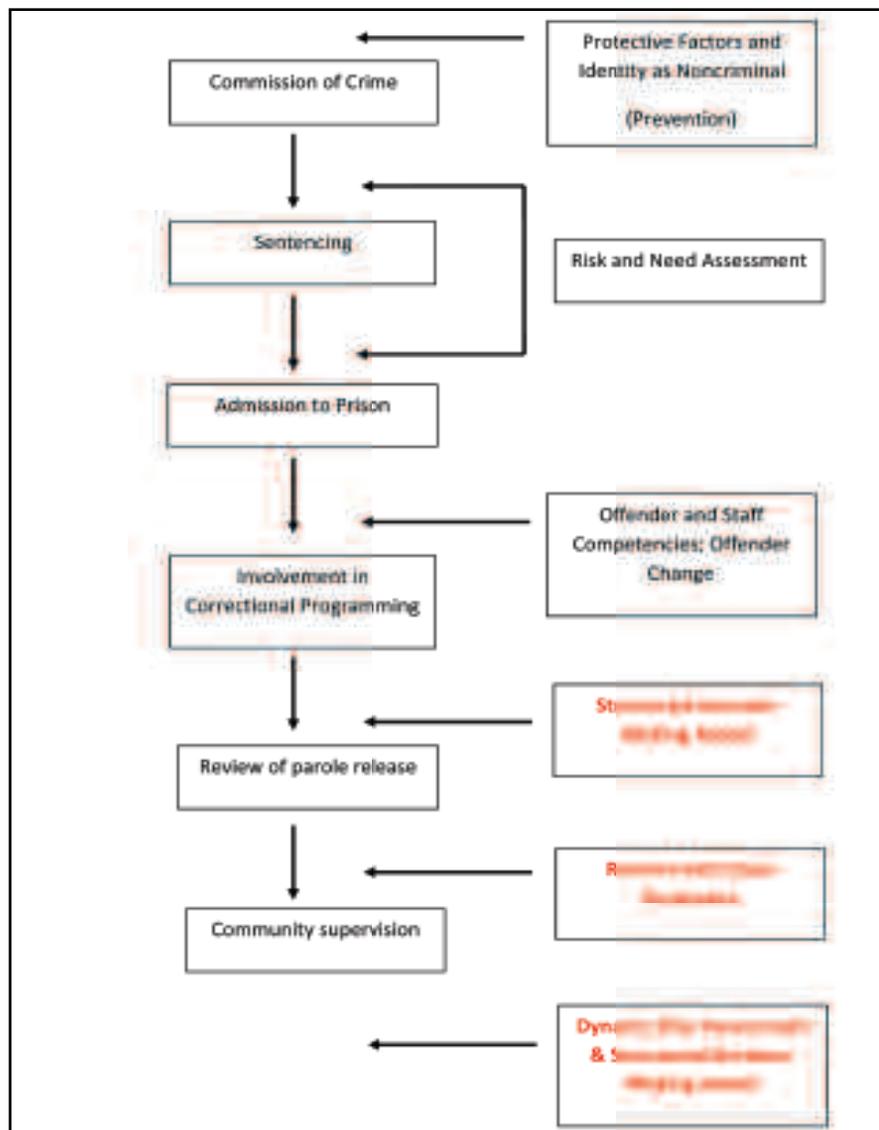


Figure 2. Decision-Making Framework

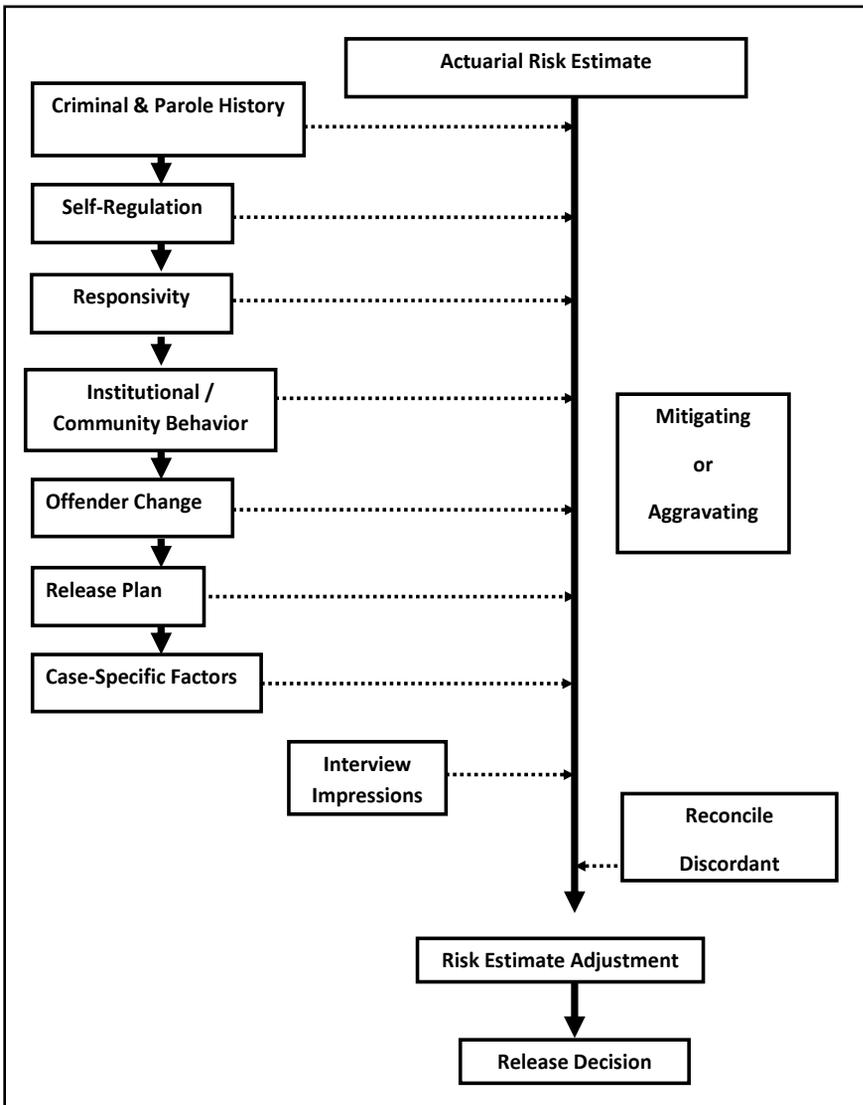


Figure 1 reflects a continuum from commission of a crime, through arrest and sentencing (probation and prison), to successful completion of community supervision. Highlighted along this continuum are entry points for engaging the offender, influencing change and improving case-based decisions. The premise is that improvements along this continuum will augment existing group-level effect sizes and incrementally enhance correctional practice and outcome at the case level.

Structured Decision-Making

Given that discretionary parole decisions dictate the timing of an offender’s release in many jurisdictions, their contribution to public safety results is unquestionable. The

traditional lack of incorporation of research and evidence in this area — and therefore lack of transparency and consistency — is surprising.

In 2003, funded by Parole Board Canada, the Criminal Justice Decision-Making Laboratory undertook a program of research aiming to increase the transparency, consistency, efficiency and accuracy of parole decision-making. This culminated with the development of a structured parole decision-making framework, which represents a synthesis of the extensive body of research on recidivism and its predictors. Use of the framework can contribute to increased quality of parole decisions by ensuring that all factors relevant to risk and public safety — and no irrelevant factors — are considered in reaching decisions. Following the framework ensures that parole deci-

sions extend beyond simply offense information and statistical risk scores to consider all the additional information which may nuance each offender’s risk or its manageability within the community.

The framework utilizes a structured professional judgment approach, which means that it defines what information to consider in reaching parole decisions, while recognizing parole decision-makers’ professional expertise regarding how to do so. This approach is more transparent, consistent and defensible than the unstructured decision-making traditionally used.⁵ In addition to the offender’s statistical risk score, which acts as the decisional anchor, the framework highlights the specific areas for consideration as depicted in Figure 2. The offender’s risk is combined with these factors, which are assessed as being aggravating, mitigating or neutral, to support the final decision. This framework is now policy in Parole Board Canada and replication research has begun in the U.S. and is being funded by National Institute of Corrections.

Examinations of the framework’s utility have produced promising results (e.g., average six percent improved accuracy across five studies)⁶ and increased consistency across decision-makers, such that parole decisions reflect the offender’s case and not differences among decision-makers. In short, the framework represents a due diligence model of decision-making that can withstand external review and criticism.

Reentry and Crime Desistance

Reentry is a critical period for eventual success.⁷ More than simply a description of how offenders reintegrate after release, reentry is a dynamic process in which a committed offender can reinvest in his or her community, be hindered by difficult obstacles or actively pursue further crime. Some core considerations include community resources (e.g., available housing and employment), immediate risk and strength factors (e.g., living with a criminal friend versus a supportive spouse) and investment in staying crime-free (e.g., the

Figure 3. When internal change factors have greater influence on offenders' lives than criminal risk factors, this results in desistance from crime.



offender seeks prosocial goals). A strong body of research from the Urban Institute suggests that opportunities for employment, noncriminal social support and access to services assist offenders in desisting from crime.⁸

This process of moving away from anti-social behavior is certainly related to the community supports described above, but this process must additionally encompass internal changes within the offender (see Figure 3). Specifically, offenders giving up crime must first be responsive to a crime-free life, be able to imagine living conventionally and be willing to seek assistance toward this goal. As a result, the Criminal Justice Decision-Making Laboratory has begun efforts to systematically investigate how ex-offenders make gains toward crime desistance.

To develop understanding of individual pathways to crime desistance, questionnaires were developed to assess offenders' perceptions of staying crime-free.⁹ Offenders rate their motivation to pursue a crime-free life in addition to other aspects of their engagement in the change process. Initial results show promise for contributing to how researchers conceptualize offenders' investment in change. For example, offenders self-report that they require different influences in their lives to stay crime-free compared to when they were committing crimes. Also, those offenders who endorse high motivation to stay crime-free also report being aware of the challenges they will face and the effort it will take to reach their goal.

By examining the external and internal elements that help influence success among returning offenders, this research may improve one's abil-

ity to recognize, describe and predict change on an individual level. This knowledge would have wide implications for practice, extending backward to influence how release decisions are made, and moving forward to aid strategies for offender management.

Dynamic Risk Assessment

Evidence-based practice for community supervision highlights the need for a case plan that reflects an accurate and ongoing assessment of risk and need.¹⁰ Continuous assessment of dynamic risk contributes to identifying which offenders are at risk of reoffending and when reoffending is likely. Having information on both the "who" and the "when" can help determine how to reduce the likelihood of reoffending through the timely and appropriate allocation of supervision resources. The Dynamic Risk Assessment for Offender Reentry (DRAOR)¹¹ is a behavior-anchored rating scale that was developed to examine pathways to successful community supervision. It assesses criminogenic needs, both stable (i.e., criminal attitudes) and acute (i.e., recent substance use) as well as protective factors (i.e., being responsive to advice).

Initial findings from a pilot study in New Zealand demonstrated the DRAOR is a reliable and valid measure, and predicts which offenders failed parole.¹² Feedback from the probation officers confirmed that the DRAOR is a brief but useful measure that helps structure their interactions with offenders and simplify their role. In comparison to other dynamic risk measures (e.g., the Level of Service Inventory-Revised) the DRAOR provides a more proximal

and sensitive index of change, and also includes protective factors that reflect contemporary desistance research. In a recent U.S. study, initial findings indicate that protective factors are most predictive of reentry success.¹³ It is expected that protective factors facilitate risk management by insulating at-risk offenders from reinvolving themselves in criminal behavior.

The DRAOR has recently been implemented across New Zealand as a national standard in community corrections and testimonials indicate its use has markedly changed the focus and utility of probation contacts. It is currently under review for adoption in Iowa and research is commencing in several other jurisdictions. Existing evidence shows the DRAOR holds promise as a new dynamic risk scale that can inform case planning and improve case-based decisions. Moreover, this research highlights the importance of considering more proximal and protective factors in the management of risk of community supervised offenders. Encouraging the field to strategically strive for incremental gains in key practice areas (release decisions, assessment of offender change and dynamic risk management) rather than massive overhauls¹⁴ will lead to greater buy-in by corrections practitioners, yield greater cumulative empirical support and result in fewer implementation challenges.

ENDNOTES

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¹³ Serin, R.C. and Prell, L. 2011. Pathways to crime desistance for probationers. Unpublished manuscript, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.

¹⁴ Cullen, F.T. 2011. Taking rehabilitation seriously: Creativity, science, and the challenge of offender change. *Punishment and Society* (in press).

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