



ENHANCING REHABILITATION IN JAILS AND PRISONS

**The role of the Risk Need Responsivity model
and treatment programs**

BY DR. BRYAN L. KLINE



One of the main goals of the criminal justice system is rehabilitation and this can be achieved through a variety of different programs. One method used to reduce violent offending is by using the Risk Need Responsivity principle, which has been proven to help reduce recidivism. The Risk Needs Responsivity model is a theoretically and empirically informed approach to offender management (Vose et al., 2020).

In the United States, there are violent and non-violent incarcerated individuals in local, state and federal correctional facilities. According to Taxman (2020), the Risk Need Responsivity model is framed at addressing how to respond to individuals with different forms of violent or violent related behaviors. When assessing the needs of offenders, criminogenic and non-criminogenic needs should be assessed. The emphasis that is used by the Risk Need Responsivity model is linking individuals to needed services and using programs that can help the offender with learning to manage his or her aggressive behaviors (Taxman, 2020). If an offender is able to learn how to manage their aggressive behaviors, they will be less likely to recidivate.

The Risk Need Responsivity model is based on a summary of what psychology knows about changing behavior paying specific attention to criminal behaviors (Dvoskin et al., 2012). The Risk Need Responsivity model is connected to different models of behavior. According to Dvoskin et al., (2012), the RNR model is connected to the general personality and cognitive social learning model of human behavior, the general personality and cognitive social learning models are considered holistic, interdisciplinary and are open to a full range of factors including biological, personal, interpersonal, familial, structural and cultural. All of these factors need to be addressed accordingly for rehabilitation to be effective for reintegration back into society.

Programs and practices that are considered effective include cognitive behavior programs aimed at building skills; therapeutic communities, with stronger effects for programs that have a continuum of care; and cognitive processing, which is focused on decision making skills (Taxman, 2020). The RNR model requires trained practitioners use validated assessment instructions to identify the risks and needs of offenders. Risk refers to the level of supervision and services to be delivered to

the offender, as well as the offender's likelihood to recidivism (Vose et al., 2020). In this case, offenders who have been identified as high-risk offenders would receive high supervision along with a high level of treatment services.

Risk principle

Risk is the likelihood an offender will engage in future criminal behavior and is determined by static factors and dynamic factors. Static factors are normally based on criminal history and cannot be decreased by intervention. The dynamic factors are also referred to as the criminogenic needs of an offender and are decreased by interventions. To employ the risk principle, actuarial assessments must be done to determine which offenders are high, medium or low (Podguski, 2016). Risk factors for offenders can include age, gender and race along with environmental factors. Many risk assessments tools that are used in the criminal justice system have been validated against the probability those assessed will be arrested for or convicted of a new criminal offense or returned to custody for a technical violation (Marlowe, 2018). The risk principle states supervision and the intervention intensity should match the individuals recidivism risk.

Risk is not determined by the following:

- Clinical judgement
- Offense committed
- A measurement of the dangerousness of the offender or likelihood of violence
- Related to an offender's motivation to change (Podguski, 2016).

Need principle

The need principle is the part of the model that targets the factors that are lined the most with recidivism. The term need has a different meaning to many. Most criminal justice professionals bifurcate needs into two categories; they are: criminogenic and non-criminogenic needs (Marlowe, 2018). The criminogenic needs are also known as the dynamic risk factors, which are best determined by actuarial assessments, dynamic needs related to the likelihood of reoffending, the top and lesser needs and the ability to reduce recidivism if addressed (Podguski, 2016). Criminogenic needs of offenders have changed over a period of time, the growth in the prison population

has directly impacted the ability of institutions to meet the growing needs of inmates (Chamberlain, 2012). There are different criminogenic needs and responses to these needs. The criminogenic needs are anti-social cognition, anti-social companions, anti-social personality and family and or marital, substance abuse, social achievement and leisure and recreation (Podguski, 2016). The responses to these needs are:

- Reduce anti-social cognition, recognize risk thinking and feelings, adopt an alternative identity
- Reduce association with criminals, enhance contact with pro-social
- Build problem solving, self-management, anger management and coping skills
- Reduce conflict, build positive relationships and communication, enhance monitoring/ supervision
- Reduce usage, reduce the supports for abuse behavior, enhance alternative to abuse
- Enhance performance rewards and satisfaction
- Enhance involvement and satisfaction in pro-social activities (Podguski, 2016).

**The higher risk offenders
do not participate in programs
or do not have the opportunity
to participate in programs
as low risk offenders do.**

Responsivity principle

The responsivity principle goals ensure participants receive the services that are needed and do not receive **more services than needed and receive services in the most effective manor (Marlowe, 2018)**. The responsivity principle is how to target and account for an offender's strengths, abilities, learning styles, traumatic history and other relevant considerations when designing treatment goals and service delivery (Podguski, 2016). The responsivity principle is where the offender is involved

in the rehabilitative process. General responsivity involves the use of cognitive behavioral techniques, motivational interviewing, natural support systems and the measurement of feedback (Podguski, 2016). The specific responsivity involves the consideration of static factors such as learning style, gender, culture, age and IQ; while the changeable factors are motivation levels and self-esteem (Podguski, 2016).

The need for treatment

No treatment program or intervention is expected to work for every inmate or offender; providing too many services or the wrong services fails to improve outcomes (Marlowe, 2018). Every offender who is incarcerated should be in a treatment program while incarcerated. One of the main goals of the criminal justice system is rehabilitation; offenders who are incarcerated have an unlimited amount of time while in a facility. This time should be used for productive matters instead of negative events. Some programs are court ordered and others are voluntary; and while incarcerated, offenders can benefit from various treatment programs.

The successful reintegration of offenders into the community involves participation from prison-based programs that will help offenders prepare for transition from the prison to the community (Chamberlain, 2012). For a smooth transition from a prison facility into the community, the community needs to have an involvement. Faith based organizations and nonprofits need to assist in the final stages of the transition from being incarcerated to the community. According to Chamberlain (2012), there is overwhelming evidence that offenders who participate in treatment programs do better when released, but it is unknown whether offenders who participate in programs are those who have the greatest needs. The higher risk offenders do not participate in programs or do not have the opportunity to participate in programs as low risk offenders do.

Low risk offenders have the opportunity to participate in programs such as work release which helps the offender reintegrate easily back into the community. The reason for this is they already have employment, a source of income and a vested interest in their success upon release. If prisons use evidence-based practices, they have the ability to identify the needs of inmates



and match the inmate with the appropriate services. It is expected prisons are responding to inmate needs on an improving basis which should lower recidivism rates among those who have served time (Chamberlain, 2012).

Correctional programs and case plans that are inline with the risk needs and responsivity model have shown decreased levels of recidivism in males and females, youth and minority offenders in the community and custodial settings (Dyck et al., 2012). Research indicates the RNR model is successful with adult and youth offenders who are incarcerated. The RNR model is associated with decreases in substance abuse relapses and a variety of criminal behaviors, including nonviolent, gang related and sexual offenses (Dyck et al., 2012). Using the RNR model has exhibited cost savings for taxpayers. According to Dyck et al., (2012), the RNR model compared to traditional sentencing has a \$2 cost for each 1% decrease in recidivism, compared to \$40 for each 1% decrease when using regular sanctions. As noted, using the RNR model can provide a highly reduced recidivism rate without a high increase in cost.

Conclusion

In conclusion, research shows the Risk Needs Responsivity model can be used as an effective tool for local, state and federal correctional facilities. Inmates need to have access to programs that are going to help their rehabilitative process for release. Low risk offenders have more opportunities for treatment while incarcerated than high risk offenders do. Local, state and federal prison facilities should be offering multiple programs for high risk and low risk level offenders. All offenders should be placed into a treatment program; if

this is not happening, the criminal justice system is failing the offender, victim and society.

The risk need responsivity model also exhibits a reduction of cost and recidivism for offenders. If the RNR module is being used effectively, it will help close the revolving door of offending for lower risk offenders and some high-risk offenders. Once an offender is released back into the community with the correct skill set to be a productive member of society, the offender becomes a tax paying citizen once they are gainfully employed. If this happens, the criminal justice system has done an effective job rehabilitating offenders and has met the original intentions of the criminal justice system. **CT**

REFERENCES

- Chamberlain, A. (2012). Offender Rehabilitation: Examining Changes in Inmate Treatment Characteristics, Program Participation, and Institutional Behavior. *JQ: Justice Quarterly*, 29(2), 183–228. <https://doi-org.saintleo.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/07418825.2010.549833>
- Dvoskin, J, Skeem, J, Novaco, R, & Douglas, K. (2012). *Using social science to reduce violent offending*. Oxford University Press.
- Dyck, H. L., Campbell, M. A., & Wershler, J. L. (2018). Real-world use of the risk-need-responsivity model and the level of service/case management inventory with community-supervised offenders. *Law and Human Behavior*, 42(3), 258–268. <https://doi-org.saintleo.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/lhb0000279>
- Marlowe, D. (2018, July 17). The most carefully studied, yet least understood, terms in the criminal justice lexicon: Risk, need, and responsivity. Policy Research Associates. <https://www.prainc.com/risk-need-responsivity>
- Podguski, R. (2016). The Basics of Risk-Need-Responsivity. *The Pennsylvania Commission of Crime and Delinquency*.
- TAXMAN, F. S. (2020). Violence Reduction Using the Principles of Risk-Need-Responsivity. *Marquette Law Review*, 103(3), 1149–1178.
- Vose, B., Cullen, F. T., & Lee, H. (2020). Targeted Release in the COVID-19 Correctional Crisis: Using the RNR Model to Save Lives. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 45(4), 769–779. <https://doi-org.saintleo.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s12103-020-09539-z>



Dr. Bryan L. Kline has established a distinguished career in criminal justice, primarily focusing on program development and management, policy formulation, and educational leadership. His professional journey has spanned over 15 years, during which he has driven innovative reforms and developed comprehensive programs within the criminal justice system. Dr. Kline is the former Warden at Westmoreland County Prison and is currently the Director of Reentry Services for an Organization in Pittsburgh, PA. For information on Dr. Kline visit www.bryankline.com.