Effective Correctional Interventions

The primary goals of the justice system are to reduce crime and to improve the lives of those who are justice-involved, victims, families, and communities. To do this, correctional interventions must help decrease people's risk of recidivism and increase their likelihood of remaining law-abiding.

Characteristics of Effective Interventions

Decades of research have provided justice system professionals with a framework to help determine the characteristics of interventions that contribute to behavior change. Studies have found that an effective intervention:

- **IS GROUNDED IN RESEARCH:** The intervention is based on sound theory and prior research showing how it will reduce the recidivism rate of the targeted population. It is piloted in a smaller setting and, if needed, adjustments are made before widespread application. Research continues after implementation to ensure the intervention reflects the most up-to-date understandings.

- **INCORPORATES RNR PRINCIPLES:** The intervention adheres to the principles of risk, need, and responsivity. It is focused on those people who are at a moderate or high risk of recidivism as determined by a validated risk/needs assessment, it addresses people's criminogenic needs, and it takes into consideration their responsivity factors.

- **USES CBT AND SOCIAL LEARNING:** The intervention relies primarily on a cognitive behavioral or a social learning approach to change thinking patterns and to help build skills that address criminogenic needs. Skills are modeled, taught, practiced, reinforced, and applied in increasingly challenging day-to-day situations.

- **IS WELL-IMPLEMENTED:** The intervention is implemented with integrity, in the manner intended; offers an appropriate amount of dosage; and is of an appropriate length and intensity.

- **IS PARTICIPATORY:** People are actively engaged in the intervention and they complete programming.

- **IS MARKED BY STRONG COMMUNICATION:** Criteria for participation in the intervention; intervention expectations, including requirements for completion; reinforcements for positive behavior change; and consequences of noncompliance are clearly communicated.

- **IS LED BY WELL-TRAINED STAFF:** Staff have the proper education, experience, and expertise; initial and ongoing training; and supervision and support.

- **INCLUDES EVALUATION:** Quality assurance processes, such as observations, file reviews, participant feedback surveys, self-assessments, and/or formal evaluations, are in place to ensure fidelity to the original model, active participation, and positive outcomes.

Correctional interventions must help DECREASE people's risk of recidivism...

...and INCREASE their likelihood of remaining law-abiding.

Programs that have been found to not reduce recidivism—and that may, in fact, increase recidivism—rely on:

- punishment, sanctions, or incarceration
- specific deterrence, or fear-based approaches (e.g., Scared Straight)
- military models of discipline and physical fitness (boot camps without treatment)
- shaming people into changing
- intensive supervision without treatment

- drug education or prevention, with a focus on fear or emotional appeal
- non-action-oriented group counseling
- sharing information (as opposed to teaching and practicing skills)
- providing external controls (e.g., GPS monitoring)
- unstructured processes or curricula

Program Evaluation Tools

Jurisdictions can use evaluation tools, such as the RNR Program Tool for Adults (part of the Risk-Need-Responsivity Simulation Tool), Correctional Program Assessment Inventory (CPAI), or Correctional Program Checklist (CPC) to determine the effectiveness of a program and how it can be improved.

Programs are rated on a variety of dimensions, such as organizational culture, leadership, goals and theory, structure and dosage, implementation and maintenance, adherence to RNR principles, staff qualifications and training, and quality assurance processes, depending on the tool.

While the RNR Program Tool for Adults is an online self-assessment, the CPAI and CPC are administered by trained evaluators who gather information through staff and participant interviews, documentation reviews, observations, and other means. A report is written or generated that rates the domains examined, lists strengths and areas in need of improvement, and offers research-supported recommendations for advancements.

CrimeSolutions

The National Institute of Justice launched CrimeSolutions (https://crimesolutions.ojp.gov) in 2011 to help practitioners and policymakers understand what works in terms of justice-related practices and programs. Using a standardized evaluation process, assessors rate practices and programs as "effective," "promising," or "no effects." Decision makers can then use this information to help decide which measures to implement. Practices and programs can be searched by topic area, type, targeted population, setting, gender, and other characteristics.