Making ‘what works’ work: Issues relevant to addressing youths’ needs during probation services

by

Zohrah Haqanee

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in School and Clinical Child Psychology Graduate Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development University of Toronto

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Zohrah Haqanee

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Applied Psychology and Human Development
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Abstract

Semi-structured interviews with 29 probation officers were conducted about their experiences addressing youths’ criminogenic needs in accordance with the Risk-Need-Responsivity framework. Probation officers discussed barriers they face at the individual, organizational, and systemic level (‘environmental’ issues that transcend – but impact on – the individual youth). Results revealed that challenges probation officers faced included ambiguity with respect to their role addressing certain risk-need domains, waitlist for services, having to prioritize certain noncriminogenic needs, involving parents, and the prevalence of mental illness (particularly concurrent diagnoses). Probation officers also discussed systemic barriers that they felt were out of their control but significantly impacted youths’ risk. Results are discussed in terms of implications for theory, research, policy, and practice.
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1 Study Overview

1.1 Rehabilitation of Young Offenders

Over the last two decades, the advances made in the correctional field for the rehabilitation of offenders have greatly contributed to our understanding of the potential for criminal rehabilitation. When interventions adhere to all three principles of the Risk-Need-Responsivity framework (Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge, 1990), particularly in community settings, reductions in recidivism of almost 30% have been reported (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). This framework guides who receives treatment (higher risk cases), what intermediate targets are set (reduce criminogenic needs), and what treatment strategies are employed while considering individual variables, such as cognitive ability, that will likely impact the effectiveness of intervention (responsivity factors).

Examining the implementation of the risk-needs framework in probation is especially important in light of recent trends to divert youth from custodial sentencing in many parts of the world (Hazel, 2008). For example, in Canada, the use of rehabilitative interventions in the community for high-risk offenders has grown since Canada’s current youth justice legislation, the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA), was introduced in 2003. Recent statistics in Canada for 2010-2011 showed that there were about 14,800 youth (aged 12 to 17 at the time of offense) in Canada’s correctional system (excluding Quebec and Nova Scotia), and the majority of them (90%) were under community supervision. This is in contrast to just over 1,500 youth, or about 10% of those in the correctional system, who were in custody. Furthermore, in Canada under the YCJA, youth must serve one third of any custodial sentence in the community under probation.

Despite this positive evidence, implementation of ‘what works’ in probation practice has proven challenging, wherein assessment of needs does not necessarily drive provision of services
and/or treatment goals (Flores, Travis, & Latessa, 2004; Latessa, Cullen, & Gendreau, 2002; Maupin, 1993; Sutherland, 2009; Young, Moline, Farrell, & Bierie, 2006). This study qualitatively explored some of the barriers probation officers may face at the individual (e.g., youth, families) and organizational (e.g., availability of services) level and what this means, in practice, for addressing youth’s criminogenic needs.

1.2 Implementation of the Risk-Need-Responsivity framework in probation

Criminogenic needs – factors empirically associated with reoffending – lie at the heart of the Risk-Need-Responsivity model (Andrews et al., 1990) of rehabilitation. Criminal history, procriminal attitudes (e.g., attitudes/values/beliefs favourable to crime, actively rejecting help), procriminal associates, and antisocial personality (e.g., inflated self-esteem, aggression) represent what is referred to as the “Big Four” risk factors for future offending (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). The remaining criminogenic needs together with the big four complete the “Central Eight” risk factors for criminal conduct: family/marital status (e.g., inadequate supervision, parental difficulty in controlling behaviour), substance abuse (e.g., chronic drug or alcohol use, substance use linked to offenses), leisure/recreation (e.g., limited organized activities), and education/employment (e.g., low achievement, truancy). The Need Principle asserts that the majority of the intermediate targets for intervention should be these needs that relate to offending (Andrews & Bonta, 2010).

Effective treatment intervention in probation at the individual level consistent with the RNR framework requires the appropriate assessment of needs. With the introduction of third and fourth generation risk-needs assessment tools (e.g., the Level of Service Inventory-Revised or LSI-R; Andrews & Bonta, 1995), a standardized, objective, empirically informed measure of youths’ need areas, driving risk to offend, has been possible. In Canada, six out of ten provinces
currently use some version of a Level of Service Inventory-based tool to assess risk and criminogenic needs for youth (Hannah-Moffat & Maurutto, 2003). Identification of youth’s criminogenic needs allows probation officers to match youth with appropriate treatment or services on an individual basis.

The most widely used risk-management tool in youth justice settings across North America is the Youth level of Service/Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI; Hoge & Andrews, 2002). The YLS/CMI has been validated across a number of studies for its ability to predict recidivism in youth justice populations (Catchpole & Gretton, 2003; Jung & Rawana, 1999; Onifade et al., 2008; Vieira, Skilling, & Peterson-Badali, 2009). There is evidence showing that agencies that adopt structured and validated RNR assessment systems demonstrate greater reductions in recidivism (Andrews & Bonta, 2006) and more appropriate allocation of resources without a significant increase in reoffending (Vincent, Guy, Gershenson, & McCabe, 2012).

Unfortunately, in many jurisdictions, research suggests that despite administering risk/needs assessments, youth justice caseworkers sometimes fail to use this information for the provision of services or setting treatment goals for individual youth. Flores, Travis, and Latessa (2004) surveyed correctional staff across three juvenile justice correctional agencies in Ohio to determine the utility of the YLS/CMI in case management. Whereas 86% of survey respondents reported using the overall risk score of the YLS/CMI to inform decisions about supervision intensity, only 56.7% of respondents reported using the needs scores to identify treatment goals. In addition, only 19.6% of respondents reported that their agency reassess youth to determine if case management needs have changed. Treatment and services listed in the case plans were largely unrelated to the need identified by the YLS/CMI with the exception of peer relationship where youth were more likely to have a “no contact” condition in their case plan. These results
are interesting given that almost 60% of practitioners surveyed reported being trained on the YLS/CMI and normally spent approximately an hour to complete the assessment.

Young, Moline, Farrell, and Bierie (2006) described and evaluated the implementation of structured risk-need assessment in the Maryland’s Department of Juvenile Services and found similar results showing that probation officers were not always applying needs information to the provision of services for youth. Referral for mental health and substance abuse needs predominated relative to other needs (e.g., education). Giving staff feedback early on about inconsistencies in matching service provision to needs (i.e., ‘data driven monitoring’) called for more structured referral guidelines and also exploration of availability and suitability of programming for needs across various jurisdictions. These results resonate with qualitative data collected in Canada suggesting that there is a lack of community programming available in order to adequately address youths’ criminogenic needs (Hannah-Moffat & Maurutto, 2003).

The gap between the assessment of needs, and targeting those needs, is especially concerning given the strong evidence that the extent to which individual probationers’ identified criminogenic need are targeted during probation predicts likelihood of recidivism. Vieira, Skilling, and Peterson-Badali (2009) found that youth on probation who had few of their individually-identified criminogenic needs addressed (via referral to, and participation in, appropriate interventions and/or programs), were eighteen times more likely to recidivate earlier over a 3 year follow up period than those for whom a majority of criminogenic needs were addressed. In addition, matching services according to youths’ individual criminogenic needs during probation predicted frequency of recidivism above and beyond a youth’s level of risk. Similarly, Luong and Wormith (2011) investigated whether a case management plan devised by probation officers for individual youth based on their needs was predictive of youths’ recidivism. A match between assessed need and identified intervention was associated with a 37.9%
reduction in likelihood of recidivism for high-risk offenders. Conversely, the absence of interventions to address the needs was associated with an 81.7% increase in the likelihood of recidivism.

Research also indicates that at the level of the individual need domains, some needs may be more successfully addressed than others. In Vieira et al. (2009), the most commonly 'matched' needs (i.e., treatment or service provided for needs identified as medium-high risk) were education (67%) followed by family (55%). The least frequently matched needs were leisure (34%), substance abuse (34%), and attitude (21%). Similarly, Luong and Wormith (2011) found that despite the fact that the attitude domain was the second most common need identified, it was not matched with an intervention treatment plan; education on the other hand was commonly targeted despite lower risk relative to other needs. These authors suggested that probation officers may be targeting some needs (like attitudes) during probation directly themselves rather than relying on referrals to programs. However, Bonta, Rugge, Scott, Bourgon, and Yessine (2008) found that probation officers spent relatively little time addressing criminogenic needs directly, especially antisocial attitudes, during supervision sessions with their clients.

The finding that youth who score high in this risk-need domain (attitude) do not get the appropriate treatment services and/or do not necessarily have this addressed directly by probation during supervision is concerning considering the pre-eminence of attitudes and cognitions as predictors of criminal behaviour according to the theory behind RNR (i.e., the General Personality Cognitive Social Learning theory; Andrews & Bonta, 2006). In fact, antisocial attitudes and thinking should ideally be the primary target of intervention for youth on probation according to the RNR model (Bourgon, Bonta, Rugge, Scott, & Yessine, 2009).
1.3 “The Change Agent”: Probation officers’ role in supervision of youth

There is a recent emphasis on the need for probation officers to evolve from a case manager/resource broker role (i.e., making referrals based on assessment) to a ‘change agent’ (Bourgon, Gutierrez, & Ashton, 2011). The latter entails taking a more therapeutic/counseling approach (specifically using cognitive behavioural (CBT) techniques) in their work with youth in addressing these needs, especially youths’s thinking and attitudes, directly during supervision (Bourgon et al., 2011; Shearer, 2002; Sluder & Reddington, 1993).

Given research that suggests probation officers may not always be employing cognitive-behavioural techniques to target needs (Bonta et al., 2008), recent efforts have been made to train probation officers to use CBT in their supervision in the context of a warm, respectful, collaborative working alliance while influencing the direction of change through modeling and reinforcement. This is outlined more fully in the ‘core correctional practices’ of the RNR framework (Andrews & Bonta, 2006). In a recent randomized control study examining the effectiveness of training probation officers in cognitive-behavioural therapy and core correctional skills, results showed that clients supervised by officers who received training and support had a 2-year recidivism rate of 25.3% while clients supervised by the control group officers had a 2-year recidivism rate of 41.5% (Bonta, et al., 2011).

1.4 Current Study

The current study explored probation officers’ experiences addressing criminogenic needs to determine some reasons for the apparent gap between risk-need scores and case management goals. In addition, we examined some barriers that exist at the individual (youth, family) and organizational level and what this means for practice. We also asked how probation officers address antisocial attitudes, specifically, and the challenges they face in doing so.
2 Methodology

2.1 Participants

Using purposive and snowballing sampling, 29 probation officers (6 males, 23 females) with an active case load of youth clients or recent experience supervising youth were recruited from 12 probation offices across Central Ontario. Demographic information on the sample can be found in Table 1. The majority of probation officers had at least a Bachelor’s degree with 1 year to 28 years of experience working as a probation officer ($M=9; SD=8.31$). With the exception of one office, there were roughly equal numbers of probation officers recruited from each of the 12 offices.

Table 1. **Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 and over</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-30</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate studies</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2 Procedure

Probation officers were informed about the research via an email that invited them to
participate in a study examining the challenges associated with addressing youths’ criminogenic needs. Interested probation officers were invited to contact the researcher via email to set up a time for an interview. Probation officers were also encouraged to recruit others who may be interested in the study. Those probation officers who expressed willingness to participate were interviewed in person for approximately 30-45 minutes.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed to facilitate analysis using NVivo software (QSR International: NVivo 9, 2010). Transcripts were reviewed and participants’ responses were coded into clusters or themes using content analysis, as described by Elo and Kyngash (2008). To address the validity of the themes identified and coded from the transcripts, focus groups were then held with participants at various probation offices. The themes that were derived from the coding process were presented to officers and discussed to provide validation and further clarification and/or elaboration. A second rater also coded a proportion of the transcripts (20%) in order to establish inter-rater reliability. Interrater reliability for the coding schemes was very high among both raters ($r=.90$).

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 Probation interviews

A complete list of questions asked during interviews can be found in Table 2. Interview questions were open ended and focused broadly on probation officers’ experience addressing the criminogenic needs and barriers they faced both at the individual level (i.e., youth) and organizational level (e.g., availability of programming). In addition, questions focused on issues of prioritization in order to determine if there were factors that could take precedence over an individual youth’s risk score in the need domains. Also, we asked whether there were criminogenic needs that probation officers thought were more critical to address in order to
reduce youths’ chance to reoffend. Finally, probation officers were asked explicitly about addressing youths’ attitudes

Table 2. *Interview Questions.*

| 1. | Which criminogenic needs in your experience are easier to address? What factors do you think account for this? |
| 2. | Which criminogenic needs in your experience have proven challenging to address? What factors do you think account for this? |
| 3. | Out of the needs that are identified using the RNA, which needs do you think are more central to ensuring that the youth does not reoffend? |
| 4. | How do you find addressing youth’s attitudes and cognitions? How do you deal with this challenge/address it typically? Is this method effective? Do you refer to any particular programs? How effective do you find these referrals? |
| 5. | Have there been instances where you have had to prioritize addressing certain identified needs over others? Has this situation ever happened where you have had to prioritize noncriminogenic needs, due to the relevance for an individual youth, that were contrary to that indicated by their RNA? |
| 6. | What, if any, are some personal challenges that youth have presented with that influence the success of these youth completing programming or treatment targeting their needs? |

3 Results

3.1 Macro themes

Categories produced from the content analysis were organized in terms of whether they reflected individual, organizational, or systemic issues probation officers faced when trying to address youths’ risk-need domains. Individual factors were defined as issues residing predominantly within the youth (e.g., motivation, cognitive ability, mental health problems). Organizational factors were defined as issues arising at an institutional level, such as government funding and policy, and availability of community programs). Systemic factors were defined as ‘environmental’ issues that transcend – but impact on – the individual youth (e.g., family (in)ability to provide support and monitoring, antisocial attitudes of family members, and peer and neighbourhood influences and interactions). The frequency with which each theme was
discussed across all interviews and the minimum to maximum number of times it was discussed by probation officers are presented in Table 3. Further, based on the results of the coding, as well as further discussion with probation officers during focus groups, several overarching themes – or ‘take home messages’ – were identified. The results of the content analysis are discussed below according to these macro themes.
Table 3. *Conceptual Clusters of Themes Salient in Addressing Criminogenic Needs for Individual Youth.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Frequency Across Interviews</th>
<th>Frequency Range Within Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youths’ motivation and/or attitude</td>
<td>Precontemplative, uncooperative, resistant to services, youth having own goals.</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>0-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>Transportation, housing, food.</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>0-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental illness</td>
<td>Includes substance abuse.</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth’s ability</td>
<td>Learning disability, cognitive ability, ability to handle multiple goals.</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (developmental stage)</td>
<td>Youth’s tendency (due to age) to engage in antisocial activities, spend unstructured leisure times with peers, be significantly influenced by peers, fail to see long term consequences of actions, inability to handle multiple goals.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental illness stigma</td>
<td>Youths’ or families’ resistance to counseling and/or mental health services.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizational factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient programming</td>
<td>Quality of programming, availability of programming (waitlists), no specific programs available or exists. Includes problems accessing mental health services.</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>0-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Score</td>
<td>Range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concreteness of need</strong></td>
<td>Probation officer’s ability to identify, monitor, and measure need. Also includes ability of probation officer to determine effect of addressing need.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inability to access schools or services within schools</strong></td>
<td>Schools refusal to accept youth, evidence youth do not get their learning needs addressed</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Systemic factors</strong></td>
<td><strong>Engrained longstanding problems</strong> Deep rooted, longstanding patterns in areas of youths’ life (e.g., peers, substance abuse, school), that are usually heavily influenced by environment (e.g., youth’s neighbourhoods, family). Also includes antisocial influence of family members.</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>0-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Probation’s inability to target and make changes in family</strong></td>
<td>Families’ refusal to seek treatment or counseling, lack of parental involvement in probation in order to address risk in this domain (e.g., supervision, monitoring); Usually due to stressors that parents are facing (e.g. poverty, mental illness). Does not include families who are antisocial.</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>0-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No family support for youth at home</strong></td>
<td>Parent’s inability to provide structure, supervision, monitoring, transportation, reminders about appointments, etc., due to multiple reasons (e.g. stressors, mental illness, substance abuse).</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0-4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.1.1 Needs are easier, and more likely, to be addressed if the role of probation officers is well defined and straightforward.

One major theme that probation officers discussed was their ability to more readily address needs for which their role was defined and tasks were more concrete. Needs were considered concrete when they were straightforward to identify, measure, target, and monitor. For example, education stood out as being relatively easy to address because the issue was usually identifiable (e.g., the youth is not attending school when by law he or she should be), and probation officers usually had a defined role with respect to addressing this need (e.g., finding the youth a school to attend). They also reported multiple concrete means of monitoring progress in this domain relative to others (e.g., checking report cards, attendance records, and speaking with school staff).

Other needs such as attitudes, peers, and personality were not as concrete/specific and were often ambiguous with respect to how probation officers would directly target risk or monitor progress made by the youth because there were no standard guidelines or formal means of doing so (e.g., to gauge any change in youths’ thinking or attitudes related to choice in peers for example). As a result of this, when probation officers were targeting these need areas, they were not documenting it consistently. Furthermore, some probation officers stated they did not feel supported by management to take on a counseling role except to motivate youth to attend services. This was despite the fact that many already “counseled” youth in some way, whether it was formally reflected in their notes or not.

Instead, probation officers in this study were generally expected to refer youth to services that target these criminogenic needs, despite the fact that probation officers still directly targeted these risk-need areas in regular discussion with the youth (i.e., informally), and specific
programming for these risk-need domains was lacking. Interestingly, most if not all probation officers failed to raise the issue of a lack of specific services for risk-need domains such as attitudes, peers, and personality due to the fact that they relied heavily on (outreach) counselors who were expected to provide individualized services to youth to tackle many of these risk-need domains alongside other non-criminogenic needs (e.g., life skills) that were prevalent among this population.

Some probation officers were open to gaining additional training in using direct intervention with youth during probation to target these risk-need domains and more guidelines and structure for doing so, especially since many of the youth they see were described as resistant to programs and services they are referred to in the community. With these youth, probation officers had to spend a lot of time advocating in order for agencies to continue serving them given their high levels of disengagement, inconsistent attendance, and lack of motivation. Some probation officers stated they could greatly benefit from additional training (e.g., in cognitive-behavioural therapy) in order to target these needs directly with their clients given that these youth often had an established relationship and some degree of rapport with them when compared to their relationships with outside agencies.

### 3.1.2 Probation Officers must prioritize needs regardless of youths’ risk-need scores.

With an increasing number of low risk youth being diverted from the youth justice system, it was not uncommon for probation officers to carry caseloads of youth with multiple risk-need scores in the moderate to high-risk range that required intervention. However, while RNA scores identify several risk areas that all need intervention, the probation officer and youth still have to identify which risk-need areas to work on and when.
3.1.2.1 The Need to Focus on a Limited Number of Goals

Most probation officers stated they were reluctant to set too many case management goals for clients because they perceived the population they work with as limited in terms of the ability to handle multiple goals (e.g., referrals for multiple services) as a result of learning disabilities, cognitive ability, and immaturity. That is not to suggest that probation officers did not actively work with clients in order to help them become open to eventually addressing all risk-need areas in their life.

A major factor that played into what goals would be the focus of case management was how achievable the goals were for a given youth, and a lot of this depended on how motivated they felt the youth was to work on the specific goals. It was strongly emphasized that for case management planning, both probation officers and youth must collaborate to set the treatment targets or goals, making it a highly participatory process that has been noted by probation officers elsewhere (Schwalbe, 2012). This was the most frequently mentioned theme, after systemic issues, appearing 123 times across the 29 interviews. Also, some issues, more than others, could become particularly recurrent for the youth during supervision and as a result became the most salient treatment target.

Setting a limited number of goals also meant targeting some need areas indirectly. For example, in order to address youths’ use of free time and increase the opportunity to meet more prosocial peers, probation officers and youths would focus on finding work and/or ensuring youths were consistently (and successfully) attending school. Addressing leisure activities was often also used indirectly to target youths’ chances of meeting prosocial peers. Another example was the reliance on counseling to provide broad life skills that were assumed to also target risk in multiple risk-need areas (e.g., work/school, peers, leisure, substance abuse, etc).
3.1.2.2 Prioritizing ‘High Impact’ Criminogenic and Non-Criminogenic Needs

The above discussion also highlights probation officers’ identification of certain priority goals: targets that, when successfully addressed, also impacted other criminogenic need areas or were necessary to address before other criminogenic needs could be tackled. Some needs (such as school and/or work) were seen as critical because of the increased emphasis on youths’ need for structure, use of free time (e.g., leisure), and investment in a more successful future in order to reduce chances of criminal behaviour. Probation officers also saw family as a critical need to address (e.g., increasing supervision at home, reducing conflict) in order to indirectly influence many other criminogenic needs such as attitudes, personality (e.g., anger or physical aggression), peers, leisure, and/or substance abuse. Like education, probation officers emphasized that life at home was a strong predictor of youths’ success during probation and in the future. However, as will be discussed below, some probation officers though they had little control or influence in the family domain because of the multiple stressors and barriers many parents faced.

In addition to criminogenic needs, probation officers identified non-criminogenic needs, a particularly significant one being mental illness, that often became priority and could be time consuming to address. Several probation officers suggested a high prevalence of underlying mental health issues among the youths they saw, despite the fact that they did not always have a diagnosis. Youths dealing with mental health issues were perceived to be at a higher risk to reoffend, and they were also described as having significant difficulty in addressing other criminogenic needs, and it was not uncommon for their mental health issues to ‘bleed’ into these other risk-need areas (e.g., family, education). Issues related to Concurrent Disorders were especially prominent as most probation officers stated their clients were self-medicating using drugs, and they saw both mental health and substance use issues as significant impediments to clients achieving any real success during probation.
Youth’s mental health issues played such a significant role in the probation officers’ ability to work with the youth that many discussed the need and value of receiving some clinical support or consultation around the mental health issues with which their clients presented. On a positive note, they thought their government ministry was increasingly recognizing the significance of mental health issues by providing consultation services that they could access in a timely manner.

Probation officers also often worked with clients in trying to address basic needs such as housing, safety, food, or other financial issues, sometimes at the expense of goals related to criminogenic needs. These needs became priority because they were priority for clients (again highlighting the importance of youth’s own motivation) and could also create barriers to addressing criminogenic needs (e.g., a youth who does not have housing expected to attend school/counseling). In addition to that, however, probation officers also felt that refusal to play some active role in addressing these needs would seriously undermine rapport with the youth. As one probation officer put it, “sometimes we’re all these youth have.”

One solution to youths with multiple needs, including non-criminogenic ones, was to refer them to outreach counselors who could help them with more practical issues in the community (e.g., obtaining housing, applying for work), while also counseling youths around their various criminogenic needs. These workers also often picked youth up from their homes, bypassing the issue of transportation that was noted by some as a significant factor in youth’s lack of attendance to general programming consistent with other research (Lockwood, 2012).
3.1.3 Problems with access to, and quality of, outside services limit probation’s effectiveness.

3.1.3.1 Waitlists for Service

Besides issues related to insufficient programming for some risk-need domains (e.g., attitudes, peers, and personality) it appears that long waitlists, especially for outreach counseling, mental health treatment, and intensive substance abuse treatment is a significant problem. Probation officers indicated that youths could sometimes undergo multiple mental health assessments without any conclusive diagnosis, treatment plan, or admission into relevant programming due to their failure to meet particular diagnostic criteria for admission or due to long waitlists. Similarly, youths often had trouble accessing residential substance abuse programs due to long waitlists.

The inability to quickly respond to clients’ service needs resulted in ‘closed windows of opportunities’ for many youths who, according to probation officers, often vacillated in terms of treatment motivation during their probation period. This was especially true for mental health and addictions issues. Youth were described in a state of constant flux, with priorities, needs, emotions, and attitudes changing weekly. At one time a client could be attending probation sessions regularly and ready to commit to some form to programming only to find that there were assessments or waiting lists that would cause delay. When programming did become available, the client could be hard to contact and/or have little motivation to actively participate. Waitlists especially created barriers because probation officers only have a limited time to work with any given youth and there were often no appropriate substitute programs available for youth while they waited.
3.1.3.2  Appropriateness and Quality of Programming

Quality of programming and appropriateness of services for moderate to high risk youth were also identified as barriers to effectively addressing youths’ criminogenic needs. As mentioned earlier, probation officers described a major push back from many community agencies who were unwilling to work with challenging and resistant clients (e.g., inconsistent attendance, noncommittal to treatment). Easily accessible and/or available programming was usually not intensive enough to serve their clients’ needs (e.g., medium-high risk youth). These programs often catered to low-risk youth and included standardized individual or group sessions that they believed was not tailored to meet the specific criminogenic needs of individual youth.

Probation Officers also expressed some dissatisfaction about the lack of funding for services that were in demand—such as highly individualized outreach counseling—that they found valuable for their clients. Lack of funding was seen by probation officers as leading to high turnover rates of counselors, compromises in staff quality, programs shutting down quickly, little time for communication with probation officers about individual clients, and long waitlists for particularly reputable outreach counseling agencies.

Another significant issue with respect to quality of programming was that probation officers were usually unaware of the effectiveness of programming targeting young offenders in the region or their particular treatment modality. Most, if not all, programs claimed to do some sort of cognitive-behavioural intervention, but probation officers were not always certain that this was the case, and they were often dissatisfied with the quality of services their youth were receiving; several probation officers felt program evaluation of commonly used programs was needed. However, many probation officers also stated that they were not always heard by their ministry around issues related to the programming needs of youth.
3.1.3.3 Education as a Key Program Target

Access to schools and/or the resources and services within schools was also a significant issue for probation officers especially considering that this was a “high impact” risk-need. Access to school was especially problematic for older youth and/or youth who had been out of school for quite some time. Keeping a youth in school was also a notable problem due to the often conflictual relationship between the youth and one or several schools. Many probation officers stated that schools were reluctant to accept their clients because they were particularly challenging youth who had a long history of past academic and behavioural issues coupled with what school officials perceived was a lack of motivation. Some of these youth often were very motivated to work and make money, and many were seen as well equipped to work in hands-on, concrete tasks such as those involved in various trades. However, access to vocational programs was also an issue. Although these programs were available, youth were often not qualified for admission into these programs (e.g., apprenticeships) due to course pre-requisites, waiting lists, and minimum number of high school credits required.

Probation officers also emphasized that the youth they see often require academic and behavioural supports that may have been unaddressed for years either due to the lack of involvement by the school, parents, or both. For example, parents were described as unable (e.g., cultural, language, mental health issues), unavailable (e.g., working, dealing with their other kids), or unwilling to communicate with schools in the past around conducting necessary psychoeducational assessments and facilitating special education placements for the students. In other cases, probation officers noted that findings from assessments, got ‘lost in translation’ as both parents and youth were able to identify learning needs or disabilities but lacked a real understanding of the disability, its implications, and their role in supporting the youth. Some of this was related to stigma parents and youth harboured about learning disabilities. Other times,
students were sufficiently supported until high school but failed to advocate for the necessary support and ‘fell through the cracks’ when they entered secondary school. Probation officers found that when a key relationship formed between the youth at some point during their time at school, for example with a teacher or social worker, the positive impact could be transformative. However, when there was lack of stability in such relationships (e.g., change of teachers, workers, etc.) the positive effects could not be maintained.

3.1.4 Longstanding, systemic issues result in entrenched problems that are complex and difficult to address.

The most commonly discussed theme among respondents was the overarching issues that the needs facing their clients were particularly longstanding and complex, some related to systemic issues (e.g., education system, communities and neighborhoods, poverty), which made it difficult for them (and their clients) to address. As a result, these issues were described as being beyond probation officers’ ability to truly address. For example, youths’ substance abuse, peer affiliations, attitudes and personality were seen as engrained or longstanding problems that were the product of many environmental influences, including parenting, family stressors, previous trauma, lack of success in schooling, and high risk neighborhoods and communities. Probation officers expressed pessimism about youths’ willingness to dissociate from peers with whom they have grown up who inhabit their neighborhoods, attend their schools, and become like family. Problems in schools were also described as longstanding, difficult to reverse, and negatively shaping youths’ attitude and motivation. With zero to few high school credits, respondents indicated that youths often had little motivation or wherewithal to invest in school in order to graduate. Similarly, substance abuse, particularly marijuana use, was significantly normalized in youths’ peer and community contexts.
These problems were seen as exacerbated by youths’ lack of maturity and life experiences, an individual-level factor that made it particularly difficult for them to have insight into their issues and control of their behaviour. To address these longstanding and intertwined needs, probation officers again relied on counseling to augment what they were able to provide during supervision visits because it was seen as a more intensive service. In addition, given the multiple criminogenic and non-criminogenic needs any given youth had and the significant degree of “hand holding” they needed, probation officers thought that their clients required highly individualized and flexible counseling (e.g., outreach counseling), rather than more structured treatment programs (e.g., CBT based groups) working on specified risk-need domains.

3.1.4.1 Family Involvement as both Critical and Absent in the Probation Process

Given that family was a “high impact” need, the inability to influence family was another significant issue discussed by probation officers. Families’ refusal of services and counseling as well as minimal involvement in probation meant that there was little probation officers could do about reducing risk in the home (e.g., supervision, monitoring). Unfortunately, parents were described as playing a critical role in encouraging the youth to comply with probation orders and participate in programming by providing support ranging from encouragement and modeling to transportation and reminders about appointments. Without the family’s support, there could be barriers to addressing many of the youth’s other criminogenic needs such as school, work, peers, etc. However, like other criminogenic need domains, issues with respect to family and life at home were particularly longstanding, so probation officers were pessimistic about their ability to make any real changes in the home without parents and youth being on board and open to some sort of intervention.
Parents often took a ‘hands off’ approach and understood probation to be something that youths had to deal with on their own. Language and cultural barriers were also described as making it difficult for parents to be effectively involved in the probation process. For parents who do not speak English, the need for interpreters for all instances of discussion with parents made it a challenge to involve them in the process to the fullest extent. Respondents also stated that some families were hesitant to involve outside services because it was not the norm in their culture or they had different beliefs about parenting. These families could also be resistant to seeking treatment services (including mental health services) in their own cultural community because of the stigma associated with it and the fear of hurting their family’s reputation.

Parents also faced multiple stressors at home (e.g., financial issues, mental health issues, etc.) that reduced their involvement in probation. In addition to this, some of these families had extensive involvement with probation for multiple children, further adding to their stress. At the extreme end, probation officers perceived that parents could be antisocial themselves and significantly undermine the work done with the clients during probation.

4 Discussion

Despite extensive research on the positive potential for offender rehabilitation when all three principles of need, risk, and responsivity are adhered to, research suggests that the assessment of criminogenic needs for young offenders does not necessarily drive provision of services and/or treatment goals during probation. We qualitatively explored probation officers’ experiences addressing individual youths’ criminogenic needs and in the process obtained a unique perspective that adds to recent research highlighting some of the challenges associated with implementing the RNR framework as a comprehensive rehabilitative model for all offenders.
4.1 The Importance of Non-Criminogenic and Contextual Factors in Reducing Risk

Interviews with probation officers suggested that their main criticism with respect to implementing the RNR model was that individuals’ wider concerns, namely mental health issues and contextual factors (i.e., family, environment, systemic factors), as well as youths’ personal goals and motivation, are significantly downplayed. This theme is consistent with criticisms raised in the literature that the model focuses clinical attention largely on the identification and removal of risk factors in isolation and does not consider relationships or interactions between risk factors or the importance of responsivity factors like mental health (Robertson, Barnao, & Ward, 2011), the social or cultural factors that contribute to high risk situations (Ward & Maruna, 2007), and important aspects of the individual (e.g., individual goals, preferences, strengths; Porporino, 2010; Ward & Maruna, 2007). Consequently, rehabilitation plans may overemphasize individual change while neglecting the important aspects of social and cultural environment (e.g., family, poverty, relationships; Robertson et al., 2011).

This tension between the importance of individual change via youths’ attitudes and cognition in the RNR model (i.e., the General Personality Cognitive Social Learning theory; Andrews & Bonta, 2006) and the importance of young people’s environment and other contextual factors (both past and present) in driving risk to reoffend appears to also hold true for front line workers (i.e., probation officers). For example, this discrepancy had direct impact on the types of rehabilitative plans that participants thought were appropriate for their clients. The majority of probation officers preferred individualized and intensive counseling for youth that could address both criminogenic and non-criminogenic risk factors youths presented (e.g., need for housing, addressing previous trauma, dealing with family conflict). Consequently,
interventions based on the RNR model that are likely to be narrower in scope (e.g., CBT-based group focused on changing attitudes; Robertson et al., 2011) appeared to be low in demand.

Objections have been made about the RNR framework’s emphasis on reducing risk and targeting criminogenic needs at the expense of neglecting offenders as individuals, including what they value and the personal goals they hold (Laws & Ward, 2011; Ward, Melser, & Yates, 2007). Probation officers in this study also unequivocally highlighted the importance of youths’ own motivation during probation and the challenge it can create in trying to balance the treatment of criminogenic needs with other (noncriminogenic) needs, concerns, or wishes that youths may have, especially considering most clients were described as able to work on a limited number of goals at one time. Probation officers in this study suggested that the challenge with this balance was one reason why not all criminogenic needs could be targeted during probation.

Related to this issue is the discrepancy between probation officers’ views of the risk-need domains as highly interrelated, and the focus of the RNR model on the identification and removal of risk factors in isolation without consideration of relationships or interactions between risk factors (Robertson et al., 2011). Many probation officers stated that given the limited goals youth work on during probation, some risk-need domains are believed to be targeted indirectly (e.g., probation officers belief that a youth attending school addresses their free time somewhat, or that targeting peers or family will help to address youths’ antisocial attitudes and defiance). Also, probation officers often seek services that can target multiple needs at once (i.e., counselor who helps youth access school, apply for a job, and change his antisocial attitude while working with clients in the community).

These issues may be even more crucial for youth with mental health problems, who often have more complex needs that require a broad-based treatment approach involving a strong focus on responsivity to manage risk and promote rehabilitation (Robertson et al., 2011). Participants
not only felt that a majority of their medium to high risk clients had underlying mental health issues, but also that these mental health issues should be prioritized and given as much attention as, if not more than, criminogenic needs, partly because mental health problems could create serious impediments to addressing youths’ risk/criminogenic needs. Respondents stated that mental health issues made it difficult for youths to mobilize themselves in order to attend school/work, attend structured leisure activities, resolve issues at home, and/or attend counseling to address their attitudes, personality, choices in peers, etc. The issue of concurrent diagnoses was also very prominent, as several probation officers emphasized that youths with mental health issues almost always self medicated by abusing substances, further increasing their risk to reoffend. These findings suggest that, at least implicitly, probation officers viewed mental health as an important responsivity factor in managing youths’ risk to reoffend.

With respect to the RNR framework, the critical question is whether mental health needs in and of themselves are associated with risk for recidivism or whether, by creating barriers to addressing youths’ other (criminogenic) needs, as suggested by the present findings, they put the youth at risk for further reoffending and involvement with the criminal justice system (i.e., a responsivity issue). There is evidence (e.g., Bonta, Hanson & Law, 1998) that the major predictors of recidivism are the same for mentally disordered offenders as for nondisordered offenders while clinical variables (e.g., psychosis) are nonsignificant, supporting the argument that youth with and without mental health needs must have their criminogenic needs met via appropriate case management and interventions in order to reduce their likelihood of reoffending. However, according to probation officers in this study, youths with mental health issues faced more barriers in this regard. Although responsivity is a clearly-articulated principle in the RNR framework that is integral to managing criminogenic risk (Andrews & Bonta, 2006),
mental illness as a responsivity factor, specifically, remains under-researched and the principle of responsivity in this regard may not be widely implemented in practice.

One barrier to implementation of the responsivity principle in practice with respect to mental health exists at the organizational level. Probation officers in this study stated they had difficulty accessing mental health programming for many of their clients, who they described as undergoing multiple assessments without any conclusive diagnosis or treatment plan and/or facing long waitlists to access appropriate mental health services and residential substance abuse programs. This issue is certainly not a new one, as insufficient mental health services to treat justice involved youth are a significant problem in many other parts of North America (Mackinnon-Lews, Kaufman, & Frabutt, 2002). Also, to date, staff who work within the criminal justice system have had little training in identifying the mental health needs of juvenile offenders (Chitsabesan & Bailey, 2006). Some probation officers in this study stated that they would benefit from additional clinical support or consultation around mental health issues with which their clients presented. Also, recent initiatives such as mental health courts for youth (see Colwell, Villarreal, & Espinosa, 2012) that promise faster access to mental health services (usually for youth first entering the justice system) may be crucial in order to address these issues as early as possible.

4.2 Role of Probation Officers

A second issue that has been raised previously and further explored in this study was the evolving role of probation officers from case managers/resource brokers (i.e., making direct referrals) to “change agents” (Bonta et al., 2011; Bourgon, et al., 2011) within the RNR framework. In this study, probation officers still understood their role as being case managers/resource brokers rather than ‘change agents,’ and they thought that management had similar expectations. That is not to say, however, that probation officers did not target
criminogenic risk-need domains informally in addition to making relevant program referrals. However, probation officers stated that their practice as described was not straightforward or fully captured in the current RNR framework.

Generally, proponents of the RNR model agree that training typically delivered to probation and parole officers focuses mainly on the law, polices, regulations, administering risk assessments, writing presentence reports, and motivational interviewing. However there is little guidance (or research) on how to apply the RNR principles to one-on-one supervision (Bonta et al., 2011). In this study, probation officers’ stated that their role with respect to directly targeting certain needs was more ambiguous than others (i.e., attitude, personality, and peers versus education), and many suggested that they did not have the appropriate tools or skills to fully address and monitor risk in these need domains (aside from making program referrals).

These findings highlight the need for changes at the policy level that involve renegotiation of probation officers’ role with respect to criminogenic needs and implementation of more concrete guidelines and tools to help them target risk-need domains, especially for the group of youth who do not respond well to program referrals. Research has started to take heed of this as seen in recent initiatives such as the Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision (STICS; (see Bourgon, Bonta, Rugge, Scott, & Yessine, 2009) that is attempting to train probation officers in cognitive behavioural techniques with some demonstrated success in reducing recidivism (Bonta et al., 2011).

4.3 Risk in Context: The Importance of Family and School

The perspective of probation officers in the current study was that school and family represent “high impact” needs such that addressing them is perceived to significantly reduce criminogenic risk and should be priority targets regardless of risk-need scores. This is consistent with the argument that there is a greater need to consider development of antisocial behaviour
and serious delinquency among adolescents from an ecological risk perspective that pays close
attention to parent-child and other immediate social-contextual relationships (e.g., schools),
especially since these factors can interact to attenuate the effects of broader contextual factors
that are under less control (e.g., poverty, high-crime neighbourhoods; Butler, Fearon, Atkinson,
& Parker, 2007).

Although participants conceptualized school and family to be “high impact” needs for
youth, language and cultural barriers, parental health or mental health needs, financial stressors,
having to care for multiple children, and/or having other children who are heavily involved in the
youth justice system all translated into less parental involvement in trying to address youths’ risk
to reoffend in these need domains. Participants described parental involvement as important in
order to work with parents to increase supervision and structure at home. Even other simple tasks
such as parents providing consistent reminders and encouragement for youth to comply with
probation orders made it more likely clients would succeed in addressing their criminogenic
needs, according to probation officers in this study. Previous research with probation officers has
also highlighted parental support as a critical ingredient for greater youth participation in the
probation process Schwalbe (2012). Working with parents of young offenders on increasing
parental monitoring is especially important given research suggesting that it may help reduce
substance abuse, sexually risky behaviour, and further reoffending, even among youth with a
history of family problems such as parental substance abuse and neglect/abuse (Robertson,
Baird-Thomas, & Stein, 2008).

At the organizational and policy level, these findings have implications for the resources
necessary and services to target parents of at-risk youth in order to decrease the
emotional/psychological, financial, and health related burdens parents may be facing that limit
their availability and involvement in important aspects of their children’s lives, especially once
they have entered the youth justice system. There is much research that needs to be done in this area, especially with respect to parental involvement in probation. The scarce research that does exist concerning parental involvement focuses heavily on the early stages of youth justice proceedings such as that which takes place at the police station and in court (Peterson-Badali & Broeking, 2010).

Like family, risk in the education domain was crucial to address for youths regardless of their risk-need assessment scores. However, gaining access to schools, keeping youths in school, and catering to their unique education and/or vocational needs proved to be challenging for many probation officers. Many participants suggested the need for more (and more effective) collaboration between the education system and the youth justice system.

Like the large numbers of youth on probation with significant (unaddressed) mental health needs, youth on probation are comprised of youth who are more likely to have been marginalized from the education system early on and who continue to struggle during probation. Probation officers in this study also highlighted the highly conflictual relationship that youth have with several school and staff at school that usually begins before youth are even on probation. Minority students are significantly more likely to be referred for disciplinary action and more likely to be suspended and expelled compared to their peers, and this trend can be seen as early as in the elementary years (Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba, et al., 2011). In addition, students with disabilities are more likely to be suspended compared to peers without a disability (Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006) which is concerning given that youth with learning or intellectual disabilities are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system (Casey & Keilitz, 1990).

Participants in this study also pointed out that many youth they see often have some learning difficulties and/or learning disability and struggle academically and behaviourally—a
pattern that begins early on and continues throughout their entire education. In addition, some probation officers stated that not all youth have received or been able to appropriately utilize the resources within schools. Probation officers perceived this to be the result of a lack of communication both on the part of parents and schools. Probation officers discussed that little involvement of parents in youth’s education means that there is less advocacy, less solid awareness and understanding of learning needs, and subsequently less support that is especially detrimental for youth transitioning from middle school to high school. Once youth enter high school, they were described as being significantly less supported and as a result of lacking skills in self-advocacy, they continue to struggle.

These findings, like others, suggest the need for changes at the policy level in the educational system and increased collaboration between systems, especially to find other avenues to address behavioural problems without punishing students for what may be symptoms of their disability or mental health issues (Krezmien et al., 2006). These schools, in partnership with the youth justice system, must continue to work with youth on probation (and their parents), whose disconnect from the school system might be especially severe and longstanding, in order to help facilitate educational and/or vocational achievement and reduce their risk of continuing to be ensnared in the criminal justice system.

4.4 Limitations and Future Directions

Qualitative research provides a unique opportunity to explore traditionally under-researched areas of interest in order to determine future directions for research that may be worthwhile. Research involving field staff and management is perhaps most crucial in order to advance implementation of the RNR framework. Research must first identify and assess existing practices by working with staff at all levels of the organization, not just administrators. For
example, similar to the findings of the present study, in public organizations such as juvenile justice agencies, there are often significant discrepancies between direction and policies put forth by administrators and practices in the field (you need a reference for this). Also, close monitoring of implementation can serve purposes related to accountability (e.g., with respect to ‘treatment integrity’) among staff and supervisors as well as collection of data that is useful for service planning and development. Future research should include larger scale surveys of the possible issues, such as those present in the current study, in addition to others that probation officers may encounter when supervising clients within the RNR framework.

Other findings and issues raised in the study point to future directions for research and practice. The mental health needs of young offenders have drawn increasing attention, particularly for youth in custody. Future research needs to unpack mental health issues in the context of an RNR framework as a responsivity factor for youth on probation. Responsivity thus far has been mostly concerned with characteristics that may influence the effectiveness of treatment (Robertson et al., 2010). In addition, there is an urgent need for more research and changes at the policy level in order to increase timely access to appropriate mental health services for youth on probation.

Similarly, there needs to be a greater push for studying parental involvement in the probation process given the age group and the significant reliance that these youth continue to have on adults around them compared to adult offenders. There is also a need for more research on what can be done at the organizational and systemic level to eradicate the debilitating stressors (i.e., mental health issues, financial burdens, language/cultural barriers) these parents face that preclude their full involvement in the youth’s life both in and outside of probation. Aside from significant reliance on parents at home, school is another important context for children and youth that significantly contribute to their risk for delinquent behaviour. Yet, the
educational needs of young offenders continues to be an under researched area of study that results in few changes at the administrative level to help these youth gain access to schools, access to resources within schools, and relevant vocational training, and ultimately success.

### 4.5 Conclusion

When discussing their experiences and challenges with respect to effectively targeting youths’ criminogenic needs, probation officers in this study identified barriers both at the individual and organizational level. They also identified needs as complex and longstanding that were often interrelated and influenced by systemic issues. This characterization of the barriers to effective service of needs as a multi-systemic issue leads to the implication that if we are to have effective implementation of the RNR framework we need changes that are also multi-systemic (i.e., to policy, practice, and to the RNR model itself). A multi-systemic, ecological approach to understanding the issues that justice-involved youth face is not new (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), nor is the idea that multisystemic treatments are highly effective with these issues – we now need to turn our attention to bringing multi-systemic, ecologically sound changes to the effective delivery of services to the field of probation in order to eradicate the barriers to effective service that are limiting our successes with justice-involved youth.
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