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Haqanee, Zohrah., Peterson-Badali, Michele., & Skilling, Tracey

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Making 'What Works' Work: Examining Probation Officers' Experiences Addressing the
Criminogenic Needs of Juvenile Offenders

Zohrah Haqanee

University of Toronto

Michele Peterson-Badali

University of Toronto

Tracey Skilling

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health & University of Toronto

Zohrah Haqanee, Department of Applied Psychology & Human Development, University of Toronto; Michele Peterson-Badali, Department of Applied Psychology & Human Development, University of Toronto; Tracey Skilling, Department of Psychiatry, University of Toronto

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Zohrah Haqanee, Department of Applied Psychology & Human Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 252 Bloor Street West, 9th Floor, Toronto, ON, Canada, M5S 1V6. email: zohrah.haqanee@mail.utoronto.ca

Abstract

This study qualitatively explored front-line perspectives on the challenges of addressing youths' criminogenic needs within a Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR)-based case management framework. Twenty-nine probation officers from Toronto, Canada participated in semi-structured interviews. Emergent themes included the importance of targeting 'high impact' criminogenic needs (needs that – when effectively addressed – also have an impact on other need domains in addition to a direct impact on criminogenic risk), the salience of specific responsivity factors in case management, the lack of evidence-based programming available to youth, and respondents' uncertainty regarding their role in addressing criminogenic needs. Results highlight the need for research examining the interrelationship of criminogenic needs, specific responsivity factors and educational outcomes of youth on probation. Findings also support recent initiatives that provide concrete training to probation officers around implementation of the Need *and* Responsivity principles in effective case management of justice-involved youth.

Making ‘What Works’ Work: Examining Probation Officers’ Experiences Addressing the Criminogenic Needs of Juvenile Offenders

Over the last two decades, advances in correctional psychology have contributed to our understanding of the potential for rehabilitation in both youth and adult correctional populations. One of the most widely used models for assessment and case management of justice-involved youth is the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) framework (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Andrews, Bonta & Hoge, 1990). Based on a substantial body of research conducted over the past 25 years, the framework outlines a systematic, evidence-based approach for evaluating an individual’s risk of future offending and identifying the specific factors (criminogenic needs) that must be addressed to reduce risk, while paying heed to treatment modality (general responsivity) as well as individual characteristics such as cognitive ability, learning style, and motivation that may impact the effectiveness of interventions (specific responsivity). The ‘Big Four’ risk factors most strongly linked with reoffending are an individual’s criminal history, antisocial attitudes, antisocial peers, and certain aspects of personality (e.g., poor self-control, aggressiveness). Family dysfunction (e.g., low levels of nurturance and supervision), substance abuse, difficulties at school and/or work, and lack of prosocial leisure activities round out the ‘Central Eight’ criminogenic needs (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). While criminal history is a static risk factor, and therefore not amenable to intervention, the Need Principle dictates that the remaining seven criminogenic needs should be the primary targets of intervention designed to reduce reoffending. When interventions adhere to all three principles of the framework, particularly in community settings, reductions in recidivism of almost 30% have been reported (Andrews & Bonta, 2010).

The RNR framework has expanded from an initial focus on risk prediction to the current, more comprehensive, approach that views assessment as the basis for the development of a case management plan. It has been applied in Canada, the United States, Britain, Europe, Australia and New Zealand and is the basis for many empirically-derived rehabilitative treatment and case management programs in these countries. Evidence indicates that agencies that adopt these structured and validated RNR-based assessment systems demonstrate greater reductions in recidivism (Andrews & Bonta, 2010) and more appropriate allocation of resources for their clients (Vincent, Guy, Gershenson, & McCabe 2012) than those that do not, although it may be the structured nature of the intervention that takes place, rather than the model's principles per se, that account for these positive results (e.g., Duncan, Miller, Wampold & Hubble, 2010).

Despite positive evidence, implementation of 'what works' in probation practice has proven challenging in that assessment of individuals' criminogenic needs does not necessarily drive the establishment of treatment goals and/or provision of services (Flores, Travis, & Latessa, 2004; Latessa, Cullen, & Gendreau, 2002; Maupin, 1993; Sutherland, 2009; Young, Moline, Farrell, & Bierie, 2006), which can result in a large percentage of youths' criminogenic needs being left unaddressed (Vieira, Skilling, & Peterson-Badali, 2009). In order to contribute to the literature, reviewed below, which highlights difficulties with the effective implementation of the RNR framework and principles in everyday practice, the present qualitative study focused on probation officers' experiences addressing criminogenic needs in their case management of community-sentenced youth.

Research on Implementation

As noted above, even when jurisdictions and/or agencies mandate the use of RNR-based assessment and case management, there is no guarantee that the results of these protocols flow through to front line service provision. Flores et al. (2004) surveyed correctional staff in Ohio to determine the utility of a structured RNR assessment tool (the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory; YLS/CMI; Hoge & Andrews, 2002) in case management. Whereas 86% of respondents reported using the overall risk score of the YLS/CMI for initial risk classification, only 56.7% reported using criminogenic needs scores to identify treatment goals, and services listed in case plans were largely unrelated to the needs identified by the YLS/CMI. The study did not explore the under-utilization of the tool further to suggest why this might be. In a similar vein, the Auditor General of Ontario (2012) reported that more than half of the files reviewed for youth with completed case management plans did not have goals for at least one of their high-risk factors. In addition, for a significant number of files, there was no evidence that probation officers made adequate efforts to assist youth to meet at least some of their case management goals.

In attempting to understand these implementation gaps, Miller and Maloney (2013) took a classification approach to probation officers' compliance with respect to use of risk-needs assessment tools. They described 'substantive compliers' (who comprised roughly half their sample) as using these tools for assessment and decision-making. However, even within this most compliant group, practitioners routinely exercised substantial discretion in targeting needs *not* highlighted by the tool, though what these noncriminogenic needs were was not explored. 'Bureaucratic compliers' comprised nearly 40% of their sample; these officers reported relatively

high levels of compliance in completing or updating the tool but much lower levels of compliance in relation to decision-making around implementation of recommendations.

Limited availability of programming has been described as one barrier for practitioners trying to implement recommendations based on assessment tools (Gebo, Stracuzzi, & Hurst, 2006; Shook & Sarri, 2007). Other research reports that practitioners may disagree with the tool's recommendations, although the reasons for this have not been explored (Shook & Sarri, 2007). Luong & Wormith (2011) suggest that practitioners may be pessimistic about the effectiveness of treatment planning in reducing recidivism. Schwalbe (2004) suggests that practitioners may continue to rely on their clinical judgement based on training and experience and/or lack training or awareness about effective utilization of risk assessment tools.

To examine what actually goes on in supervision sessions, Bonta, Rugge, Scott, Bourgon and Yessine (2008) analyzed audiotaped interviews between 62 probation officers (youth and adult) and their clients. They found that probation officers spent relatively little time directly addressing criminogenic needs, particularly antisocial attitudes and procriminal peers. In a recent randomized control study, Bonta and colleagues (2011) demonstrated that training probation officers to be more focused on criminogenic needs (procriminal attitudes in particular) was effective in reducing the likelihood of reoffending. Clients supervised by officers who received such training and support had a two year recidivism rate of 25.3% while clients supervised by the control group officers had a recidivism rate of 41.5% (Bonta et al., 2011). To that end, there have been calls within the RNR field for a change in the role of probation officers from that of 'case managers/resource brokers' (i.e., making referrals based on assessment) to 'change agents' (Bourgon, Gutierrez, & Ashton, 2011). The latter role entails directly addressing clients'

criminogenic needs – especially pro-criminal thinking and attitudes – during supervision (Bourgon et al., 2011; Shearer, 2002; Sluder & Reddington, 1993).

Although roles are prescribed in job descriptions and agency policies, as Skeem and Manchak (2008, p. 221) note, “supervision philosophies and practices...vary considerably across agencies and officers”. Indeed, there is evidence that probation officers’ individual knowledge and beliefs about RNR principles (Ballucci, 2012; Haas & De Tardo-Bora, 2009; Luong & Wormith, 2011; Vincent et al., 2012) and about the validity of the tools used in their risk-need assessment practice (Miller & Maloney, 2013) impact implementation of risk-needs assessment and case management.

Even when probation officers *do* attend to RNR principles and protocols in planning intervention, some criminogenic needs receive more attention and are more successfully addressed than others (Bonta et al., 2008; Luong & Wormith, 2011), and there are times when noncriminogenic needs, such as housing and mental health, are prioritized over criminogenic ones (Bonta et al., 2008; Young et al., 2006). In a Canadian study of RNR-based probation practice, Luong and Wormith (2011) reported that while certain need domains (education, peers, and substance abuse) were *over*-identified and programmed even when need scores were low, other identified needs (e.g., antisocial attitudes) lacked intervention plans despite moderate/high scores. As noted above, lack of appropriate programming to address certain criminogenic needs may account for some of the variation in the success with which RNR-based assessments are actualized (Hannah-Moffat & Maurutto, 2003; Shook & Sarri, 2007; Young et al., 2006).

The Present Study

Findings from the studies reviewed above indicate that results of risk assessments are often not fully implemented in terms of case management. However, while studies have identified this ‘implementation gap’, the reasons for this gap have received much less attention. The purpose of the present study was to explore this gap from the perspective of youth probation officers. On the basis of the existing literature, we focused on several questions: why are some criminogenic needs more frequently and successfully addressed than others?; how do probation officers select and prioritize youths’ needs in case management (including whether, when, and why they deviate from the results of their risk-needs assessments)?; (how) do probation officers address pro-criminal attitudes in their practice?; and what are barriers to youths’ successful completion of programming?

A qualitative, semi-structured interview-based methodology was chosen in order to address these questions in a more open-ended and nuanced manner than would be possible with methods typically associated with quantitative designs. It was considered particularly important to understand the perspectives of front-line service providers on this implementation gap issue given they are crucial in moving the RNR framework from theory to practice and they are typically underrepresented in the juvenile justice research literature (Schwalbe, 2012).

Method

Participants

Twenty-nine probation officers (21% males, 79% females) from eight offices in the Toronto, Canada area participated in the study, with roughly equal numbers from each office

(except for two offices that had one participant each). Seventy-six percent of participants reported their ethnicity as white, 17% as black, and 3% as Asian. Most respondents (62%) were 31-49 years of age; 21% were in the 24 to 30 year range and 14% were 50 years or older. All participants had at least a bachelor's degree; experience as a probation officer ranged from 1 to 28 years (median = 5.5 years).

With respect to probation officer caseloads, standard practice in the jurisdiction includes a caseload of approximately 26 clients (Officer of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2012); participants' caseloads ranged from 20-26 clients. Training provided to new officers includes risk-need assessment, case management planning, introduction to motivational interviewing, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and strengths-based approaches, legislation, and report writing. Policy concerning risk-need assessments mandates that probation officers use risk-need scores to determine supervision level and to guide case management planning, which targets risk and relevant treatment and rehabilitative needs. In addition to initial training, every year officers receive additional training on various topics.

Ministry statistics concerning youth probationers in the region for 2012-2013 indicated that the majority were male (86%) and the average age was 16 years. Of 21 offense categories, the most common offense for youth probationers was a 'serious violent offence' (21%) followed by 'assault and related' (19%), 'theft and possession' (14%) and 'break and enter' (9%) (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, personal communication, August 26, 2013).

Procedure

Probation managers of all five Toronto offices were informed by their central ministry office that a study examining officers' experiences regarding case management had been

approved and were asked to forward the researchers' information letter and invitation to participate to all probation officers in their offices. Interested officers then contacted the researchers to make arrangements for interviews; managers were not aware of which officers chose to participate. Of the 44 officers across the five offices, 23 (52%) chose to participate. After they were interviewed, participants were asked to let any colleagues who might be interested know that they could contact the researchers to arrange for an interview. Six participants from three additional offices in the Toronto area were recruited via this 'snowballing' process (Grbich, 1999); recruitment continued until theme saturation was reached.

During the consent process, all participants were informed that their responses would remain confidential and were given the opportunity to decline to have direct quotes included in publications. Participants were interviewed in person for approximately 60 minutes using a standard set of interview questions that were followed up with individualized probes in order to fully explore their responses.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed to facilitate analysis using NVivo software (QSR International: NVivo 9, 2010). Responses were coded into 12 themes grounded in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and derived from material across the entire interview rather than from responses to particular questions. An independent rater coded six transcripts according to the themes developed from the initial coding. Inter-coder reliability was excellent (ICC using a two-way random effects model = .83 (CI: .64 - .94; Fleiss, 1986). To explore the validity of our interpretation of the data, participants from each probation office but one¹ attended follow-up focus groups, during which the themes were presented and discussed to garner feedback, including clarification and elaboration. Themes and interpretations were modified in accordance

with this feedback.

Results

Participants' responses across questions – as well as the themes generated from their interviews – were often interconnected. Therefore, rather than structure the results in terms of answers to discrete research/interview questions, the themes were organized into several overarching 'take home' messages that reflected this interrelationship. The results are discussed below according to these macro themes.

Theme #1: Problems with access to, and quality of, outside services limit probation's effectiveness.

Almost all respondents identified a lack of suitable programming to target certain criminogenic needs, particularly the 'Big Four', including antisocial attitudes and peers. Probation officers also highlighted the lack of programming for higher risk, and older youth. As one respondent noted,

I haven't really found a specific program that helps for [attitudes and thinking]. When I was working in the adult system there were some programs that I got trained in teaching to adults. One is anti-criminal...something like Changes of Choice. We have some volunteer programs that I sometimes use, but they are very surface level...they meet with a volunteer for three sessions to just talk about criminal thought patterns and how that affects them.

Instead, many probation officers referred youth to general counselors who they hoped could target these needs, especially with respect to attitudes, but they faced long waitlists for programming due to a lack of funding or staff turnover. Participants also described pushback from community agencies that were unwilling to work with challenging and resistant clients:

That's the thing - we send you the kids that no one else will work with. That's your mandate that you work with hard-to-reach at-risk youth. What did you think

was going to happen? Of course they're going to not show up five million times; of course they're going to give you excuses. Just having quality staff ... funding the program and funding quality staff to actually work is...hard.

Concerns about overall poor quality of services led many to believe there was a great need for evaluation of community treatment programs to determine future programming needs for high-risk clients. One probation officer noted that,

A lot of the counselors aren't CBT trained. The Ministry is supposed to hire programs that use CBT but they're not doing it. There has to be program evaluation to find out if the people running it are applying the methods that they're meant to.

Access to schools and/or the resources and services within schools was also an issue probation officers highlighted; this problem was especially salient considering they perceived school as a high impact need (see below). Access was especially problematic for older youth and/or youth who had been out of school for some time. Many participants stated that schools were reluctant to accept their clients because they were particularly challenging youths who had a long history of past academic and behavioral issues coupled with perceived lack of motivation and effort. Many youths also developed negative reputations among the various schools both due to their behavior as well as being labelled as 'offenders.' As one respondent noted,

The schools really don't want to deal with our kids, especially if they come from lower income, visible minorities, and parents who aren't really proactive in demanding the services from the school; they kind of get slid under the carpet and just pulled along until they're old enough to get them out of the system. We have to fight with the schools a lot of the time to get our kids back into school.

Theme #2: Needs are easier to address if they are straightforward and the role of probation officers is well defined.

Respondents stressed their ability to more readily address needs that were concrete and straightforward to *identify, measure, and monitor*. For example, notwithstanding the concerns discussed above regarding their clients' ability to successfully engage in education, participants described education as being a *relatively* straightforward need to tackle on the probation side 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 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 and attendance records, speaking with school staff).

In contrast, the attitudes, peers, and personality need domains were considered more challenging to address because they were less concrete with respect to measurement, targeting, and monitoring (e.g., due to absence of standardized guidelines for assessment and documentation) and therefore probation officers' activities were less clearly and explicitly reflected or *visible* in their practice. One respondent described the difficulty as follows:

So, the difference between addressing education, addressing leisure activity time stuff and addressing substance abuse: so the kid is either going to school or they're not and here's what you are doing about it. And the same with substance abuse -- they either abuse or they don't and here's what they are doing about it; but when it comes to attitudes and orientation, their personality, peer relations it's a lot more difficult to paint a black and white picture of the work that you do.

In addition, although participants stated that they often targeted the more challenging criminogenic needs such as antisocial attitudes and peers directly during supervision through discussion with youth (in addition to referring clients to outside service providers) in an effort to facilitate change in the youth's thinking, feelings and behavioral choices, some did not feel they were adequately trained to take on this counseling role:

The Ministry is coming out with more directives that probation officers are supposed to be using cognitive behavioral approaches and moving [clients] through the stages of change. However, we are not...trained. Yes, we sat in on maybe a day or a couple of days to learn the framework of what CBT is, but if the Ministry is moving more towards us in using CBT in our work with the youth, we need to be trained as more cognitive behavioral therapists.

This was despite the desire to do more to address youths' criminogenic needs during supervision, especially for the subset of highly resistant youth who were not successfully attending outside programming. Yet, some felt management did not support them to take on a greater counseling role; instead they were restricted to encouraging clients to follow through with programming:

Sometimes it takes you a long time to move them through the stages of change, and management doesn't understand that. Our case notes don't reflect that we are targeting these areas and we can't even see whether they make that much progress except if they end up going to the programs or they don't get charged. There is a reliance on outreach counseling for these types of needs because there's an emphasis on referrals but a lot of kids don't have the trust with the other workers. We have developed that trust, they see us regularly, they have to come see us; we have the leverage.

Theme #3: Probation officers must prioritize needs, and the ranking is not always dependent on youths' risk-need score in that area.

Setting a limited number of goals. Most probation officers stated they were reluctant to set too many case management goals for clients at one time. Respondents believed their clients had limited ability to handle multiple goals because of a number of factors such as motivation, learning disabilities, cognitive ability, and maturity level. Another major factor in determining what goals would be the focus of case management was how *achievable* the goals were for a given youth, and much of this depended on how motivated they thought clients were to work on the specific goals. Issues that were recurrent for clients during supervision were also prioritized.

Participants stated that both probation officers and clients must collaborate to set treatment targets. As one respondent noted,

Our kids have so many needs that to address every single one of them is impossible...You have to prioritize basically, is what I'm trying to say. They're the key player in all this, and they're the ones that need to want to do it...I can have my ideas, but it doesn't really matter. I want him to be doing something. If it's a choice between me hammering him over the head with what I want or him doing what he wants, I'll take what he wants.

Setting a limited number of goals also meant targeting some need areas *indirectly*. For example, youths' good use of free time and the opportunity to meet more prosocial peers was not necessarily targeted directly; probation officers and youths focused on finding work and/or ensuring youths were consistently and successfully attending school, which then indirectly led to addressing leisure time and peer issues. Addressing leisure activities was often also used to indirectly target youths' chances of meeting prosocial peers. Counseling to provide broad life skills, which was assumed to target several need areas (e.g., work/school, peers, leisure, substance abuse), was seen as another means of dealing with the challenge of working on multiple goals with their clients. One respondent commented that,

Sometimes it may be a little bit tricky, because he may score high on, let's say, school. But peer relations are also an issue. So even so school is the higher number, if you target his peers and help him to make wise choices for peers of positive influence that will make him basically...help his schooling. We can go by the score, but then you have to use common sense, as well, as to what is making him stay out of school. It's his friends. It's the substance use.

Prioritizing 'high impact' criminogenic needs. The above discussion also highlights probation officers' identification of certain *high impact* needs: targets that they believe, when successfully addressed, also impacted other criminogenic need areas. Education and employment were seen as critical in their own right and also because addressing them was thought to address related

needs for structure, appropriate use of free time and investment in a more successful future in order to reduce future offending. Similarly, respondents saw family as a critical need to address (e.g., increasing supervision, reducing conflict at home) in order to indirectly influence many other criminogenic needs such as school, attitudes, personality (e.g., anger or physical aggression), peers, leisure, and/or substance abuse as well as ensuring the youth attends programs or treatments. Probation officers emphasized that they believed life at home was a strong predictor of youths' success during probation and in the future.

Family is definitely high up there because if you don't have that strong family nothing is going to work. I've said many times you can't fix the kid and put him back in the same situation so regardless of any circumstance, if the family isn't supportive or strong, nothing you do is likely going to be really successful.

Participants reported that some parents took a 'hands off' approach, understanding probation as something that youths had to deal with on their own. Language and cultural barriers were also described as preventing parents from being effectively involved in the probation process. In addition, some families were seen as hesitant to involve outside services because it was not a cultural norm or they had different beliefs about parenting. Parents also faced multiple stressors (e.g., financial and mental health issues) that reduced their involvement in probation.

Participants also discussed substance abuse (specifically chronic cannabis use) as another high impact need area. They noted, substance abuse had a significant effect on youths' day-to-day functioning and motivation and as such they believed it acted as a barrier to addressing other criminogenic needs. Respondents noted that youth almost always normalized their use, resulting in many youth participating in substance use counseling because of conditions imposed by the courts but having no real desire to change their substance use.

Prioritizing responsivity factors. In addition, although not explicitly articulated as responsivity factors, participants clearly identified responsivity concerns as significant impediments to clients' achievement of success during probation. For example, several respondents believed there was a high prevalence of underlying mental health issues among the higher risk youths they saw, although clients did not always have a mental health diagnosis. As one respondent noted,

I find that when you've got young people with mental health issues and either they aren't dealing with it or they are in denial...or they're self medicating, it can be very trying. I continue to work with them, but until they really recognize this is a problem, 'this is something I need help in', it can be difficult.

As this officer describes below, respondents often expressed a sense of frustration when trying to access mental health programming:

When it comes to mental health issues, you end up sending them to this place and then they screen them...and most of them end up not being suitable for that service. They will want a kid who is A, B and C, and maybe your kid is A, B and D. And so they will say, "Okay your kid is not suitable for our process."

Youths' and families' ethno-cultural background (particularly youth whose families were recent immigrants) and language barriers were also noted to impede the ability to address criminogenic and responsivity needs. For example, some families were seen as resistant to seeking treatment services for youths' mental health issues, including services in their own cultural community, because of associated stigma and the fear of hurting their family's reputation.

Probation officers also often worked with clients to address basic needs such as housing, safety, food or other financial issues – sometimes working on these issues before setting goals related to criminogenic needs. These needs become a priority because they were priority for clients (again highlighting the importance of youths' motivation as a determinant of probation officers' case management focus); failing to demonstrate some active role in addressing these

needs would seriously undermine rapport with the youth. Financial problems (usually related to transportation and housing) were often discussed as barriers to addressing criminogenic needs (e.g., a youth who is expected to attend school/ counseling but does not have stable housing and is preoccupied with finding a place to stay):

Sometimes none of the goals can get dealt with because of the poverty. Even to get to counselling...paying for transit...and all the kids want to work that's all they want to do, so when it comes to going to...programming its like "there's no money involved, I'm not getting paid ...I need to work." So sometimes that's all that's the driving force and so we're running around getting funding for transit passes...making applications for clothing, winter coats so we spend a lot of our energy just dealing with the poverty factor before we can even get to "well you know you need to be in counselling."

Probation officers highlighted that one solution to youths with multiple needs was to refer youth 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 many as a significant factor in youths' lack of attendance to other programming in the community.

Theme #4: Longstanding and intertwined issues result in entrenched problems that are complex and difficult to address

Some of the most commonly discussed themes among respondents centered on needs being particularly longstanding, complex, interrelated, and having a significant impact on youths' motivation, attitude, and compliance. In many instances, probation officers described these issues as being beyond their ability to address. One respondent commented,

There are a lot of factors that have affected them, especially their family...and school history. So then you get them here...on a 6 month Court Order and you're

expected to change their life in that short period of time when it's taken them such a long time to get here. And it's just not really reasonable.

For example, youths' risk in several of the criminogenic need domains were seen as longstanding problems resulting from many environmental influences, including parenting, family stressors, previous trauma, lack of success in schooling, and more systemic factors like poverty and living in high risk neighborhoods and communities. More importantly, these longstanding and entrenched problems were described as having a significant and negative influence on youths' attitudes and motivation. Many participants expressed pessimism about their ability to make lasting changes in these domains, especially during the limited time youth are on probation.

These problems were seen as exacerbated by youths' lack of maturity and life experience that made it particularly difficult for them to have insight into their issues and control of their behavior compared to adults in the system. To address these intertwined needs, probation officers again relied on outreach counseling to augment what they provided during supervision visits because it was seen as a more intensive service. In addition, given youths' multiple criminogenic and non-criminogenic needs, respondents thought that their clients required highly individualized and flexible counseling.

Discussion

Previous studies have identified that it is not unusual for the establishment of treatment targets and provision of service during probation to deviate from the results of standardized risk/needs assessments, even in agencies where this model of case management is mandated. Existing research has not explicitly examined the reasons for this 'implementation gap'; accordingly, this was the focus of the present study. A semi-structured but open-ended approach

to interviews with probation officers permitted a focus on issues identified in previous studies (e.g., use of clinical judgment in prioritizing needs addressed; difficulties addressing important needs such as antisocial attitudes and cognitions) while remaining open to new insights from front line service providers, who have a unique and important perspective on these questions. Thematic coding provided for participants' responses to be grouped into several overarching take home messages that permitted meaningful analysis while preserving the integrity of respondents' views and voices. Participants' reflections and feedback – obtained during focus groups following the coding process – were consistent with our organization of the data and provided support for the validity of these take home messages. In the following paragraphs, we highlight key findings and discuss results in relation to the existing literature and in terms of their implications for theory, research, and practice.

Targeting 'High Impact' Criminogenic Needs

Participants perceived that, in addition to dynamic risk factors from the 'Big Four' domains, other criminogenic need domains are 'high impact' in that, when effectively addressed, their positive effects also have an impact on other need domains, and therefore are important targets for service. Thus, respondents implicitly made a distinction between the activities of *risk assessment/prediction* (and the 'high impact' variables that most strongly and robustly predict reoffending) and *intervention/service provision* (and the 'high impact' variables that – when addressed appropriately through intervention – increase the likelihood of rehabilitation). In this latter context, the definition of 'high impact' is not synonymous with the strength with which risk factors predict recidivism when initially assessed, but on the basis of their correlation with – and therefore potential to have a ripple effect on – other domains. Participants' descriptions of this

interrelationship also highlighted how factors that fall under the category of criminogenic needs can act as both risk factors for recidivism and have an impact on how responsive youths are to making changes in other domains (e.g., leisure, peers, school). The dual nature of these needs (i.e., as criminogenic needs and specific responsivity factors) resulted in their conceptualization by respondents as high impact needs: those that greatly influenced their success with clients at the level of intervention despite the fact they may not be included in the Big Four needs.

This conceptualization may also help explain probation officers' prioritization of certain criminogenic needs over others (e.g., Bonta et al., 2008; Luong & Wormith, 2011). In the present study respondents described that, given time constraints, limited resources, and responsivity considerations (e.g., cognitive level, lack of maturity, low motivation), they often had to set a limited number of goals and for this reason were strategic in targeting domains, including considering which criminogenic needs could be ameliorated *indirectly* through their associations with directly-targeted needs. The interrelationship between criminogenic needs is an unexplored but worthwhile avenue for future research (Wooditch et al., 2013).

To illustrate, research highlights substance abuse as a criminogenic need, and therefore it has not generally been conceptualized as a specific responsivity factor in the literature. However, probation officers identified youths' substance use as greatly impacting how effectively they could target youths' *other* criminogenic needs. Thus, even if it is not identified as a factor directly related to a particular youth's offending, substance use impacts many aspects of the youth's life – such as peers, school, leisure, and antisocial attitudes – that *are* criminogenic risks that must be addressed in probation (Mulvey & Glasheen, 2011). Research also indicates that chronic cannabis and alcohol use are related to suppression of growth in multiple dimensions

of psychosocial maturity (Chassin et al., 2010), which in turn negatively impacts a youth's readiness to make changes in relevant criminogenic need domains.

Similarly, aspects of family that are not necessarily criminogenic but are related to responsivity (e.g., positive parental involvement in probation) – in addition to aspects that *are* criminogenic (e.g., parental monitoring and supervision) – contributed to participants' conceptions of *family* as a high impact need. Consistent with respondents' comments regarding the importance of parents' positive involvement, previous research has highlighted parental support as a critical ingredient for youth participation in the probation process (Schwalbe, 2012). In addition, the importance of working with parents to increase supervision of youth has been supported in research showing that it may help reduce reoffending, even among youth with a history of family problems (Robertson, Baird-Thomas, & Stein, 2008). However, studies have also highlighted the very low levels of parental involvement in their children's justice-system experiences (Broeking & Peterson-Badali, 2010; Davies & Davidson, 2001; Kilkelly, 2005; Peterson-Badali & Broeking, 2010), a finding that was echoed in participants' comments and concerns regarding parents' involvement in probation. Thus, while factors related to family (both criminogenic and noncriminogenic) do not make up the Big Four criminogenic needs, the impact of these factors on youths' responsivity to interventions targeting other identified criminogenic needs (e.g., substance abuse, school) made this domain a priority target for intervention.

In the same respect, respondents reported targeting education to reduce reoffending regardless of youths' risk-need assessment scores in that domain because they perceived connections between change in this area and other criminogenic need domains such as leisure time and peers. Education was also a concrete way to provide youth with future prospects (e.g.,

employment) as well as a sense of self-efficacy to help prevent future criminal involvement. Together with the fact that education was seen as a relatively straightforward and clear need, this may help explain the ‘over-programming’ in the education domain identified in previous research (Luong & Wormith, 2011). However, gaining access to schools, keeping youths in school, and catering to their unique educational and/or vocational needs proved to be challenging for many probation officers. These results support calls for concerted research, policy, and practice efforts for justice-involved youth in the education domain, especially given findings that youth who earn more credits while incarcerated are more likely to attend school once released, and that youth who regularly attend school post-custody are less likely to reoffend within 12 and 24 months (Blomberg, Bales, Mann, Piquero, & Berk, 2011; Blomberg, Bales, & Piquero, 2012). Future directions for research include examining academic outcomes for youth on probation and the effectiveness of various supports available to young offenders within the educational system (e.g., alternative schools, day treatment classrooms, and paid cooperative education programs).

Our definition of high impact needs also resonates with the ‘keystone approach’, which has gained attention in the behavior therapy field (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011). The premise of this approach is that targeting a limited number of ‘keystone’ skills (specific, ‘foundational’ behaviors) can have a widespread positive influence in domains where no intervention is applied (Barnett, Bauer, Ehrhardt, Lentz, & Stollar, 1996; Lalli, Kates, & Casey, 1999; Soutor, Houlihan, & Young, 1994). Similar to probation officers’ focus on substance abuse, family functioning, and education as means to address multiple *other* criminogenic needs, the emphasis on youths’ thinking and attitudes within the RNR model can be conceptualized as a keystone area, in that this target for intervention could underlie changes in other criminogenic need domains without

directly intervening in those areas *and* despite other factors (e.g., environmental variables that are under less control).

The Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision model (STICS; Bonta, et al., 2011) specifically aims to address the need for prioritization and strategic case management that was also raised by respondents who were challenged by clients with multiple moderate to high risk need areas. The STICS action plan not only recognizes the interrelationship between needs but also the hierarchy of needs. Central importance is placed on training probation officers to effectively change youths' procriminal attitudes, values, and beliefs, followed by a focus on youths' relationships (e.g., with peers and family) and lifestyle choices (e.g., substance abuse, school, leisure; Bourgon, Gutierrez, & Ashton, 2012). Further research on the keystone approach could shed light on the potential to modify a range of problem behaviors in need domains by focusing on a limited number of key target areas (including youths' thinking and attitudes) with an emphasis on targets that are under greater control of both probation officers and their clients. In addition, more explicit training on strategizing and prioritizing multiple goals and treatment targets in keeping with the keystone approach should be integrated into training for probation officers to ensure a systematic and wider application of this approach to case management.

The Importance of Specific Responsivity

Although not explicitly articulated as 'responsivity,' our study participants often focused on non-criminogenic needs – such as mental health, transportation, and housing – that influenced how responsive youths were to working toward treatment goals. Critics of the RNR framework have argued that such factors are de-emphasized in the model at the expense of focusing solely on reduction of criminogenic need/risk (Robertson, Barnao, & Ward, 2011; Ward & Maruna,

2007). It is true that responsivity is a clearly articulated principle in the RNR framework that is integral to managing criminogenic risk (Andrews & Bonta, 2010), and training probation officers to identify acute needs and crises that require immediate attention before focusing attention on youths' risk-need profile is being integrated into training initiatives such as the STICS model (Bourgon et al., 2012). However, mental illness and other more 'contextual' responsivity factors (e.g., housing) remain under-researched, and the principle of responsivity in this regard may not be widely implemented. Indeed, responsivity has generally received less attention in the correctional psychology literature than the risk and need principles (Hubbard, 2007). Thus, in addition to training on the change agent role (discussed below), as well as on specific skills (e.g., CBT, motivational interviewing), explicit training offered to more probation officers on the responsivity principle itself, including a clear definition of this multifaceted construct and evidence-based guidance on how to apply it in case management would likely enhance probation officers' ability to successfully implement the principles of risk and criminogenic need.

There has been local progress in efforts to support and complement probation officers' efforts to address youths' mental health needs, in particular. A recently established collaborative program, developed within existing community mental health agencies and aimed specifically at youth on probation, provides access to brief consultation, assessment and counseling for youth when probation officers are concerned that mental health issues may be impacting clients' functioning in the community. In addition, Canada's youth justice legislation permits a judge to order an Intensive Support and Supervision Program as an alternative to custody for youth with mental health needs, in order to facilitate receipt of necessary supports and supervision as part of a community sentence (Youth Criminal Justice Act, 2002). Finally, in an attempt to address these

issues early, youth mental health courts (Colwell, Villarreal, & Espinosa, 2012; Davis, Peterson-Badali, Skilling & Weagant, in press) promise faster access to mental health services with the goal of diverting young offenders with mental illness out of the criminal justice system and into community-based treatment.

Another responsivity issue highlighted by participants was the importance and challenge of youths' level of motivation to work on treatment goals, which resonates with Schwalbe's (2012) conceptualization of probation as 'participatory' in nature, as well as with rehabilitation approaches that emphasize the importance of focusing on *clients'* goals in order to engage them in the process of change (Ward, Yates, & Willis, 2012). At a basic level, the importance of collaborative goal setting with any client in the rehabilitative process is a common factor underlying the effectiveness of a number of different treatment modalities (DeFife & Hilsenroth, 2011). In the present study, respondents noted that at times they deviated from priorities identified by their risk assessment tools in order to build a good working alliance, which meant putting some goals on the 'back burner' until clients were motivated, as well as working collaboratively on goals clients found important. The need to focus on youths as individuals – whose agency and voice are vital to the probation process – is consistent with the RNR framework in several important respects. The responsivity principle assumes differential treatment based on individual factors (e.g., motivation, attitudes) that influence clients' amenability to efforts to change. These factors must be addressed so that criminogenic needs can be effectively targeted (Bonta, 1995). More recently, there has been greater focus within the RNR framework on encouraging probation officers to act as change agents who directly intervene with youths to enhance these responsivity factors through the use of motivational

interviewing, skill training, CBT, etc. (Bonta et al., 2011, Bourgon, Bonta, Rugge, Scott, & Yessine, 2009). However, this is not yet a widespread approach in probation.

The Role of Probation Officers: Resource Brokers vs. Change Agents

While participants reported directly targeting youths' thinking and attitudes with respect to many of the criminogenic needs (partly related to a lack of outside programming), many discussed their CBT training as lacking sufficient intensity. They also conveyed ambivalence about their role with respect to how much they should (or were willing to) intervene directly versus act as a 'case manager/ resource broker' who facilitated referrals to services. Part of this ambivalence was related to a lack of formal means to assess change in clients' motivation, thinking and attitudes, especially around more seemingly ambiguous need domains (e.g., personality, attitude, peers). If these results are reflective of officers' beliefs on a wider scale, there needs to be more widespread training on – including emphasis on *acceptance* of – the role of probation officers as 'change agents.' In addition, provision of reliable and valid measures that enable probation officers to identify and monitor change in clients' motivation, thinking and attitudes may help bridge the implementation gap and provide evidence to frontline workers about efficacy. Some of this work is already being done in projects such as STICS (Bonta et al., 2011), in which probation officers are trained to use CBT in their supervision.

Another aspect of the ambivalence that respondents expressed in relation to taking a 'change agent' role relates to the complex and intertwined nature of criminogenic needs and responsivity factors, which they connected with feelings of compromised self-efficacy around helping their clients make changes that would result in desistance from crime. In this regard, officers highlighted the need to complement their work with comprehensive, wraparound

services (e.g., Multi-Systemic Therapy) designed to address multiple, interrelated needs. These reflections suggest the need for continued capacity-building for probation officers, both in terms of therapeutic strategies and enhanced self-efficacy for helping clients make change, particularly in jurisdictions where there is an impetus for service models that rely less on outside programming (e.g., as suggested by the STICS model). This issue is particularly salient given the less than adequate provision of services for many criminogenic needs, including those comprising the Big Four, as well as lack of program evaluation of existing services (Auditor General of Ontario, 2012; Gebo et al., 2006; Hannah-Moffat & Maurutto, 2003; Shook & Sarri, 2007; Young et al., 2006).

Concluding Thoughts

Research involving field staff and management is crucial in order to advance implementation of the RNR framework. Qualitative approaches provide a unique opportunity to explore traditionally under-researched areas of interest with greater richness and depth than can typically be achieved with quantitative designs. In the present study, the exploration of factors that contribute to gaps in the implementation of evidence-based risk assessment/case management based on the experiences of the individuals who ‘do the work’ on a daily basis provided an important perspective on the RNR framework that can inform training, practice, and research in ways that are different from, but can complement, quantitative approaches (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). However, qualitative research is not intended to produce broadly generalizable results. Therefore, although participants’ reflections were generally consistent with the existing quantitative research literature, caution is clearly necessary in interpreting and making recommendations on the basis of findings due to factors such as small sample size and self-

selection of participants. In future, larger-scale quantitative studies should examine and elucidate the themes uncovered in the present study in order to address questions of robustness and generalizability, and continue to provide direction for policy and practice. In particular, while the focus of the present study was addressing youths' criminogenic needs, issues related to responsivity surfaced repeatedly in respondents' descriptions of their work and its associated challenges. A greater research focus on the responsivity principle (including understanding the interrelationship of criminogenic needs and responsivity factors in the context of case management) is one critical 'next step' to further understand and narrow the implementation gap and thereby enhance the effectiveness of rehabilitative interventions for justice-involved youth.

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Author Notes

¹ Respondents from one office were unable to participate in a focus group due to time constraints.