

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

The Neglected “R” - Responsivity and the Federal Offender

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Key Words: Responsivity, assessment, Risk, Need, Treatment

Summary/Conclusions

The current study utilized data from the United States Probation and Pretrial Services' case management system and initial Post-Conviction Risk Assessment (PCRA). Researchers sought to find the prevalence of responsivity factors, their interaction with demographics, and risk. From a sample of 19,753, 28% of offenders had a responsivity issue that interfered with success on supervision. Responsivity factors were more likely to be present in higher risk federal offenders. The most common responsivity issues were transportation (9%) and mental health (8%).

Limitations of Information

The study includes federal clients, It is unclear how the population compares to probationers in the Colorado. About 11% of all PCRA assessments were overridden. It is unknown if responsivity factors increased the likelihood of an override. Finally, the study notes that the “other” category contained criminogenic needs that were not responsivity factors. Officers may need additional training to correctly identify responsivity factors.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Identifying Barriers to Success

Adhering to Risk, Need, Responsivity (RNR) principles is an important foundation in community supervision. The responsivity principle is perhaps the least understood and studied principle in casework. The current study conducted by the United States Probation and Pretrial Services Office sought to examine specific responsivity factors for offenders placed under federal supervision.

Researchers used data from a new responsivity module, other data in the Probation and Pretrial Automated Case Tracking System (PACTS), and the initial PCRA to find the prevalence of specific responsivity factors. Additionally they looked for correlations between responsivity factors and demographic data, and if risk had any influence on the number of responsivity factors. The data set included 19,753 offenders that were placed on federal supervision between November 1, 2013 and March 30, 2014.

Of the 19,753 offenders, 28% of the clients had a responsivity issue that interfered with client's success on probation. The most common responsivity factors were transportation (9%), mental health (8%), and other (3.9%). Researchers found that as risk increased, the prevalence and number of responsivity factors also increased. Over half (55%) of high-risk and 40% of moderate-risk offenders had at least one responsivity factor during the initial assessment. Finally, the study identified some potential demographic variables that may influence responsivity factors. In

the federal supervision sample, responsivity factors were more common for younger (under 20 years old) and older (over 55 years old) clients. Females were more likely to have responsivity factors (31%) than their male (27%) counterparts. Finally, the researchers found that the racial/ethnic population with the highest percentage of responsivity factors were Native American and Alaska Natives (50%).

Practical Applications

- ✓ Create a safe (e.g. empathetic, non-blaming/judging, collaborative) environment for probationers to speak candidly about their specific responsivity factors (e.g. history of abuse).
- ✓ Learn about and be mindful of probationers cultural considerations when matching a probationer to treatment (e.g. language, religious practices).
- ✓ Ask probationers if there are any therapist attributes that would make them feel more comfortable in therapy.
- ✓ Collaborate with local service providers to help probationers problem solve transportation, basic needs, health issues, and learning barriers.
- ✓ Utilize offender service funds to provide assistance with bus passes, gas cards, treatment, and short-term housing.
- ✓ Be mindful of any specific factors that might hinder a probationer's efforts to be successful. Help problem solve (transportation, language, childcare, etc.).

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