

REHABILITATING CRIMINAL JUSTICE POLICY AND PRACTICE

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For over 30 years, criminal justice policy has been dominated by a “get tough” approach to offenders. Increasing punitive measures have failed to reduce criminal recidivism and instead have led to a rapidly growing correctional system that has strained government budgets. The inability of reliance on official punishment to deter crime is understandable within the context of the psychology of human conduct. However, this knowledge was largely ignored in the quest for harsher punishment. A better option for dealing with crime is to place greater effort on the rehabilitation of offenders. In particular, programs that adhere to the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model have been shown to reduce offender recidivism by up to 35%. The model describes: a) who should receive services (moderate and higher risk cases), b) the appropriate targets for rehabilitation services (criminogenic needs), and c) the powerful influence strategies for reducing criminal behavior (cognitive social learning). Although the RNR model is well known in the correctional field it is less well known, but equally relevant, for forensic, clinical, and counseling psychology. The paper summarizes the empirical base to RNR along with implications for research, policy, and practice.

Keywords: deterrence, offender rehabilitation, offender risk, criminogenic needs

Out of step in relation to the crime rate decreases, the incarceration rate continues to increase in the United States. From 1992 to 2007, the U.S. incarceration rate grew from 505 per 100,000 to an estimated 756 per 100,000 (Walmsley, 2009). One out of 100 adults is behind bars in the United States with one in 15 African-American men and 1 in 36 Hispanic men in prison (Pew, 2008). Over five million adults are under some form of community supervision (Glaze & Bonczar, 2007). On the youth side of the criminal justice system, nearly 2.2 million juveniles were arrested in 2007 (Puzzanchera, 2009). The United States now has approximately 20% of the world’s prison population (Walmsley, 2009). “Getting tough” on crime has become the major criminal justice policy in America.

Canada is a country in which the pursuit of rehabilitation is formally part of sentencing and correctional policy. Yet even in Canada, the physical conditions of confinement in federal prisons are being “hardened” by way of more punitive and more restrictive conditions (Sapers, 2009). As in the United States, the increase in punishment is not a reflection of increased crime in the community at large. Rather, it is an attempt to prepare for the overcrowding expected because of proposed “tough-on-crime” laws deliberately intended to increase incarceration rates and the length of incarceration (Tibbets, 2009, reporting on statements by the

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