

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *The Principles of Effective Correctional Treatment Also Apply to Sexual Offenders: A Meta-Analysis*

Hanson, R.K., Bourgon, G., Helmus, L., and Hodgson, S. 2009. *The Principles of Effective Correctional Treatment Also Apply to Sexual Offenders: A Meta-Analysis*. Criminal Justice and Behavior 36:865-891.

**Key Words:** meta-analysis, Risk, Need, Responsivity, recidivism, sex offenders, RNR principles

### **The RNR Principles and Sex Offenders**

#### **Summary/Conclusions**

The effectiveness of adhering to the Risk, Need, and Responsivity principles in reducing recidivism has been demonstrated in numerous studies. This current meta-analysis was conducted to explore whether these same three principles also apply to the reduction of recidivism in the sex offender population. The results of 23 studies were used to calculate the effect of the three principles on the reduction of recidivism. As expected, those studies that adhered to none of the principles reported consistently low effects. Conversely, for studies that adhered to all three principles, the effects were consistently large.

#### **Limitations of Information**

As with all meta-analyses, the results are dependent on the strength of the studies used to calculate the results. The sample size was limited to 23-the number of studies that met the inclusion criteria. The majority (78%) of the studies included in the analysis were based on offender populations outside of the United States, including Canada, the UK, New Zealand, and one from Holland.

**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.

This article explores whether the well-researched principles of Risk, Need, and Responsivity (RNR) apply to the sex offender population, as it does to the general offender population. A meta-analysis was conducted and after a thorough review of the literature and a strict inclusion process, 23 studies from 1980 to 2009 were selected for use in the analysis. The studies included the following characteristics/variables:

1. Fourteen studies were published in journals; 2. Five studies were based on US samples; 3. Sample sizes ranged from 16 to 2,557 offenders; 4. Twenty samples excluded women; 5. Ten studies examined treatment programs in institutions, eleven in the community, and two in both; 6. Recidivism was defined as reconviction in ten studies and rearrest in twelve; one study was unspecified. Recidivism was classified as sexual, sexual and violent, and general.

The principles were well-defined for the analysis. "Programs adhered to the Risk principle when they provided intensive interventions to higher risk offenders and little or no service to low risk offenders." The Need principle was considered, if the treatment delivered was targeted specifically to sexual or general recidivism. And the Responsivity principle was met when treatment was matched to the learning style of the client.

Overall findings indicated that treatment groups had significantly lower sexual and general recidivism rates. The same

was true for violent recidivism, although not significant. For sexual recidivism, the findings indicated a significant effect when adhering to the Need and Responsivity principles. The results for the Risk principle were in the right direction but not significant. Results for violent and general recidivism were mixed. Overall, the authors concluded, "For studies that adhered to none of the principles, the effects were consistently low; for studies adhering to all three, the effects were consistently large."

#### **Practical Applications**

- ✓ Thoughtfully engage the principles of Risk, Need, and Responsivity when managing sex offenders on probation.
- ✓ Trust quality assessments to differentiate treatment and supervision.
- ✓ When case planning, include a focus on criminogenic needs, while putting less emphasis on factors shown to have no effect, such as offense responsibility, social skills training, and victim empathy.
- ✓ Refer clients to programs that offer cognitive-behavioral based treatment.
- ✓ Consider the client's learning style, gender, language, and other personal factors, when matching to a treatment agency or provider.
- ✓ Although the Risk and Responsivity principles are important, this study indicated that the greatest gains can be had with improved adherence to the Need principle.

State Court Administrator's Office  
Colorado Division of Probation Services, Evaluation Unit  
303.861.1111; [www.courts.state.co.us](http://www.courts.state.co.us) Mar. 2012