“What works in corrections” is not a program or a single intervention but rather a body of knowledge that is accessible to criminal justice professionals.¹

The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) has been promoting the use of evidence-based practice for many years. The eight principles of evidence based corrections are summarized on the NIC website.² These principles, along with additional discussion, are presented below. Corrections and criminology research conducted over the past several decades provide substantial direction for implementing prison and community-based programs for criminal offenders. Criminologists have spanned the research-practice divide that has emerged over the last fifteen years. Now leaders in corrections must take forward the information learned and implement programs based on the principles of effective intervention.

ONE: Assess offender risk/need levels using actuarial instruments

Risk factors are both static (never changing) and dynamic (changing over time, or have the potential to change). Focus is on criminogenic needs, that is, offender deficits that put him or her at-risk for continued criminal behavior. For example, many studies show that specific offender deficits are associated with criminal activity, such as lack of employment, lack of education, lack of housing stability, substance abuse addiction. Actuarial instrument tools are available which can assist in the identification of these areas of service needs. One of the most common of these is the Level of Service Inventory (LSI). The LSI (see sidebar) may be the most used instrument: In a 1999 study, researchers found that 14% of the agencies surveyed in a national study were using the LSI-Revised with another 6% planning on implementing it in the near future. It is used in jurisdictions across the U.S. and Canada, and has been the subject of a considerable amount of research. Systematically identifying and intervening in the areas of criminogenic need is effective at reducing recidivism.

TWO: Enhance offender motivation

Humans respond better when motivated—rather than persuaded—to change their behavior. An essential principle of effective correctional intervention is the treatment team playing an important role in recognizing the need for motivation and using proven motivational techniques. Motivational interviewing, for example, is a specific approach to interacting with offenders in ways that tend to enhance and maintain interest in changing their behaviors.

THREE: Target interventions

This requires the application of what was learned in the assessment process described in #1 above. Research shows that targeting three or fewer criminogenic needs does not reduce recidivism. Targeting four to six needs (at a minimum), has been found to reduce recidivism by 31 percent. Correctional organizations have a long history of assessing inmates for institutional management purposes, if nothing else. But when it comes to using this information in the systematic application of program services, most corrections agencies fall short. While inmate files may contain adequate information identifying offender’s deficits and needs, correctional staff are often distracted by population movement, lockdowns, and day-to-day prison operations. Often, these take priority over the delivery of services based on the offender’s criminogenic needs. Staff training and professionalism becomes an essential component of developing a culture of personal change: well-trained staff can—and must—role model and promote pro-social attitudes and behaviors even while maintaining a safe and secure environment.

Thus, targeting interventions requires clear leadership and management of the prison culture. Implementation methods include the following:

- **Act on the risk principle.** This means prioritizing supervision and treatment resources for higher risk offenders.
WHAT IS THE LSI-r?

The Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-r)\(^1\) is one of the most commonly used classification tools used with adult offenders. The LSI-r is used in a variety of correctional contexts across the United States to guide decision making. In Colorado, the LSI-r is used in probation, community corrections, prison and parole to develop supervision and case management plans, and to determine placement in correctional programs. In some states, the LSI-r is used to make institutional assignments and release from institutional custody decisions. It may be the most used instrument: In a 1999 study, researchers found that 14% of the agencies surveyed in a national study were using the LSI-R with another 6% planning on implementing it in the near future.\(^2\)

The instrument is perhaps the most researched correctional risk/needs assessment and, from the first validation study in 1982, it has continued to show consistent predictive validity for a range of correctional outcomes.\(^3\)

The LSI-R assessment is administered via a structured interview. Supporting documentation should be collected from family members, employers, case files, drug tests, and other relevant sources.\(^4\) (Andrews & Bonta, 1995).

The instrument includes 54 items that measure ten components of risk and need. The components measured are:

- Criminal history,
- Education,
- Employment,
- Financial,
- Family and marital relationships,
- Residential accommodations,
- Leisure and recreation activities,
- Companions,
- Alcohol and drug problems,
- Emotional and personal, and
- Pro-social attitudes and orientations.

The LSI-r predicts recidivism but perhaps more importantly it also provides information pertaining to offender needs. Re-assessment every six months allows for an examination of whether the offender’s need level was improved by the intervening programming. Probation and DOC apply differing score paradigms for determining levels of risk and need for their respective individual populations.

Probation and DOC have set different score categories for designation of risk/need.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RISK/NEED category</th>
<th>Probation</th>
<th>DOC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>1-18</td>
<td>0-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>19-28</td>
<td>13-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>29-54</td>
<td>27-54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Level of Supervision Inventory**

Percent chance of recidivism within one year (based on total score).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LSI total score (Raw score)</th>
<th>Percent chance of recidivism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 to 5</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 to 15</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 to 20</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 25</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 to 30</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 to 35</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 to 40</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 to 45</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46 to 50</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 to 54</td>
<td>&lt;70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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Some studies have shown that lower risk offenders have a high probability of successfully re-integrating into the community without intense prison programming. They tend to have positive support groups and are not without resources. Placing these offenders in correctional programs tends to disrupt their pro-social networks and increase their likelihood of recidivism.

**Staff training and professionalism becomes an essential component of developing a culture of personal change: well-trained staff can—and must—role model and promote pro-social attitudes and behaviors even while maintaining a safe and secure environment.**

- **Act on the need principle.** The fundamental point of this principle is to provide services according to individual deficits—social skills, thinking errors, vocational training, misuse of leisure time, drug and alcohol abuse—when these are identified by the assessment in #1 above. Sex offenders, for example, have significant deficits that are identified in general assessment tools such as the LSI, but research shows they also have additional treatment needs that require specialized interventions by professionals with specific expertise.

- **Implement the responsivity principle.** Inmates, like other humans, have different temperaments, learning styles, and motivation levels. These must be acknowledged and services must accommodate and consistently promote every individual’s ability to participate in a program. Many evidence-based programs, however, have low or no success with offenders of color, and women have very different service and program needs than men. Hence, gender and cultural difference must be accounted for. Recidivism reduction requires developing interventions that are sensitive to the learning styles and psychological needs of all program participants.

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The evidence indicates that incomplete or uncoordinated approaches can have negative effects and increase recidivism and victimization.

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• **Implement the treatment principle.** The treatment principle states that cognitive/behavioral treatment should be incorporated into all sentences and sanctions. Treatment is action. First, it is centered on the present circumstances and risk factors that are responsible for the offender’s behavior. Second, it is action oriented rather than talk oriented. Offenders do something about their difficulties rather than just talk about them. Third, clinicians teach offenders new, pro-social skills to replace the anti-social ones like stealing, cheating and lying, through modeling, practice, and reinforcement. These behavioral programs would include:

  o Structured social learning programs where new skills are taught, and behaviors and attitudes are consistently reinforced,
  o Cognitive behavioral programs that target attitudes, values, peers, substance abuse, anger, etc., and
  o Family based interventions that train families on appropriate behavioral techniques.

Interventions based on these approaches are very structured and emphasize the importance of modeling and behavioral rehearsal techniques that engender self-efficacy, challenge cognitive distortions, and assist offenders in developing good problem-solving and self-control skills. These strategies have been demonstrated to be effective in reducing recidivism.11

**FOUR:**

**Provide skill training for staff and monitor their delivery of services**

Evidence-based programming emphasizes cognitive-behavior strategies and is delivered by well-trained staff. Staff must coach offenders to learn new behavioral responses and thinking patterns. In addition, offenders must engage in role playing and staff must continually and consistently reinforce positive behavior change.

Researchers have found that optimal behavior change results when the ratio of reinforcements is four positive to every negative reinforcement.12

**FIVE:**

**Increase positive reinforcement**

Researchers have found that optimal behavior change results when the ratio of reinforcements is four positive to every negative reinforcement.13 While this principle should not interfere with the need for administrative responses to disciplinary violations, the principle is best applied with clear expectations and descriptions of behavior compliance. Furthermore, consequences for failing to meet expectations should be known to the offender as part of the programming activity. Clear rules and consistent consequences that allow offenders to make rewarding choices can be integrated into the overall treatment approach.14

**Quality control and program fidelity play a central and ongoing role to maximize service delivery.** In a study at the Ohio Department of Corrections, programs that scored highest on program integrity measures reduced recidivism by 22 percent. Programs with low integrity actually increased recidivism.

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SIX: Engage ongoing support in natural communities

For many years research has confirmed the common sense realization that placing offenders in poor environments and with anti-social peers increases recidivism. The prison-based drug and alcohol treatment communities show that the inmate code can be broken and replaced with a positive alternative and, in the process, teach offenders the skills they will need upon release. Likewise, parole supervision requires attending to the pro-social supports required by inmates to keep them both sober and crime free. Building communities in prison and outside of prison for offenders who struggle to maintain personal change is a key responsibility of correctional administrators today. The National Institute of Corrections calls for:

Realign and actively engage pro-social support for offenders in their communities for positive reinforcement of desired new behaviors.15

SEVEN: Measure relevant processes/practices

An accurate and detailed documentation of case information and staff performance, along with a formal and valid mechanism for measuring outcomes, is the foundation of evidence-based practice. Quality control and program fidelity play a central and ongoing role to maximize service delivery. In a study at the Ohio Department of Corrections, programs that scored highest on program integrity measures reduced recidivism by 22 percent. Programs with low integrity actually increased recidivism.16

EIGHT: Provide measurement feedback

Providing feedback builds accountability and maintains integrity, ultimately improving outcomes. Offenders need feedback on their behavioral changes, and program staff need feedback on program integrity. It is important to reward positive behavior—of inmates succeeding in programs, and of staff delivering effective programming. Measurements that identify effective practices need then to be linked to resources, and resource decisions should be based on objective measurement.

Years of research have gone into the development of these evidence-based principles. When applied appropriately, these practices have the best potential to reduce recidivism. These principles should guide criminal justice program development, implementation and evaluation. For further information, please see the material made available by the National Institute of Corrections, at www.nicic.org.