

RESEARCH NOTE

Improving probation officers' supervision skills: an evaluation of the EPICS model

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Previous research suggests traditional probation and parole services perform less than optimally in reducing recidivism. In response to these findings, several attempts to integrate the principles of effective intervention and core correctional practices into community supervision have been made. Preliminary results from several jurisdictions suggest that the use of core correctional practices within the context of community supervision has been associated with meaningful reductions in offender recidivism. This research provided the impetus for the development of a new model by the University of Cincinnati Corrections Institute, entitled Effective Practices in Community Supervision (EPICS). The purpose of the EPICS model is to teach community supervision officers how to translate the principles of effective intervention into practice, and, more specifically, how to use core correctional practices in face-to-face interactions with offenders. Results indicated that officers trained in the EPICS model demonstrated more consistent use of core correctional practices. Remarkably, trained officers also became more proficient in their use of these skills over time as a result of participation in coaching sessions. These preliminary findings underscore the importance of training and coaching as an on-going process to assist agencies in gaining adherence to the principles of effective intervention and core correctional practices.

Keywords: principles of effective intervention; core correctional practices; RNR; community supervision; probation

Implementation of the EPICS model

Over the last decade, several attempts have been made to integrate the principles of effective intervention, and core correctional practices specifically, into community supervision (Bonta *et al.* 2010, Bourgon *et al.* 2010, Robinson *et al.* 2011, Taxman 2002, 2008, Trotter 1996, 2006). In contrast with 'traditional' community supervision, which has underscored the importance of monitoring compliance with court-ordered conditions and making referrals to service providers, these recent initiatives endeavor to teach probation and parole officers how to structure their face-to-face interactions with offenders using evidence-based practices (Bonta *et al.* 2010, Bourgon *et al.* 2010, Robinson *et al.* 2011, Taxman 2008, Trotter 1996, 2006). Preliminary results from several jurisdictions suggest that the use of core correctional practices within the context of community supervision has been associated with

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meaningful reductions in offender recidivism (Bonta *et al.* 2010, Bourgon *et al.* 2010, Robinson *et al.* 2011, Taxman 2008). This work affirms the role of probation and parole officers as agents of behavioral change, and provides empirical support for the notion that community supervision can be effective.

Despite the fact that there is now a well-developed literature regarding ‘what works’ in reducing offender recidivism, corrections professionals continue to experience considerable challenges related to ‘how to make it work’ (Gendreau *et al.* 2000a, Gendreau 2001, Taxman *et al.* 2004); in other words, practitioners often find it difficult to translate research into practice. It is perhaps not surprising that the vast majority of correctional treatment programs assessed on measures of program integrity (e.g., the Correctional Program Assessment Inventory-2010, Evidence-Based Correctional Program Checklist) do not receive a passing grade (Lipsey 1989, Gendreau *et al.* 2000b, see also Andrews and Bonta 2010). A discussion of the challenges faced in ‘real-world’ applications of the principles of effective intervention, therefore, is critical in order to develop a ‘science of implementation’ in the field of corrections generally, and community supervision specifically.

The purpose of this research note is to discuss implementation issues in a community corrections setting, and to report the results from our on-going pilot project.

Method

Overview of the EPICS model

The research on the principles of effective intervention, coupled with the most recent research on community supervision and implementation, provided the impetus for the development of a new model by the University of Cincinnati Corrections Institute (UCCI), entitled Effective Practices in Community Supervision (EPICS).¹ Similar to Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision (STICS) and Staff Training Aimed at Reducing Re-arrest (STARR) models, the purpose of the EPICS model is to teach community supervision officers how to translate the principles of effective intervention into practice, and how to use core correctional practices specifically in face-to-face interactions with offenders. Using this model, community supervision officers follow a structured approach to their interactions with offenders. Probation and parole officers are taught to increase dosage to higher-risk offenders, stay focused on criminogenic needs, and to use a social learning, cognitive behavioral approach to their interactions. Furthermore, supervisors and peer coaches are systematically engaged in the process in order to develop the infrastructure to support continued use of the model. The purpose of this article is to describe the results from the formal pilot of the EPICS model.

It is important to recognize that, even among motivated and enthusiastic trainees, successful implementation does not automatically follow a successful initial training. To illustrate, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention examined the implementation of several blueprint programs and concluded that programs that had administrative support, agency stability, a shared vision, and interagency links were more likely to successfully implement the program (Mihalic *et al.* 2004). Additionally, programs with qualified staff that were motivated and had a clear leader guiding the implementation process were more likely to succeed. Additional factors to support implementation include program integration, training and technical assistance, and internal quality assurance measures. These ideas and

lessons learned were integrated into the training and coaching protocol for the current model.

Sample

The EPICS pilot project was originally undertaken in a mid-Western probation department, and included a total of 10 probation officers (six officers were selected for inclusion in the experimental group by the supervisor, whereas the remaining four officers were assigned to the control group). Each officer was asked to recruit a total of five moderate to high-risk offenders (using scores on the Level of Service Inventory – Revised (LSI-R) or the Youth Level of Service Inventory (YLSI)) who been sentenced to at least six months of community supervision. Both adult and juvenile offenders were eligible to participate, and the sample included both males and females.

All of the probation officers assigned to the experimental group attended an initial four-day training on the model. This training included a number of participation exercises, demonstration of skills, and several opportunities for officers to practice these skills. Officers and supervisors then participated in 10 coaching sessions (approximately one per month) designed to provide refresher training on core correctional practices, cognitive-behavioral interventions, and the model itself. In addition, participants reviewed audiotapes submitted by their peers in order to discuss strengths as well as areas for improvement. Finally, coaching sessions included additional demonstrations of skills and opportunities for officers to practice with feedback.

Results

A total of 93 audiotapes were coded by UCCI Research Associates as part of the pilot project (52% from the first session; 31% from the second session; and 17% from the third session).² The experimental group submitted a total of 57 tapes (29 first session; 19 second session; and nine third session), whereas the control group submitted a total of 36 tapes (19 first session; 10 second session; and seven third session).

In what follows, the preliminary results are presented in three parts: the first contains offender demographic information, the second summarizes offender criminal histories, and the third describes the prevalence of officers in using the core correctional skills taught through the EPICS program. The implications of these early findings are then summarized and discussed.

Demographics

The demographic characteristics of the sample are described in Table 1. In both the experimental and control groups, the majority of offenders were white males with low levels of education and employment. There were two noteworthy differences between the groups. First, EPICS probationers were significantly more likely to be married than control probationers ($\chi^2 = 3.053$, $p = 0.08$). Second, and more concerning, there was a significant difference in risk category by group ($\chi^2 = 13.582$, $p < 0.01$). The primary risk/need assessments used on the offenders in the sample were the LSI-R and the Youth Level of Service Inventory (YLSI).

Table 1. Demographics of EPICS ($N=31$) and the control probationers ($N=21$).

Demographics	EPICS	Control
Mean age (SD)	29.4 (11.5)	25.3 (11.1)
White (%)	77.4	76.2
Married (%)*	22.6	4.8
Employed (%)	29.6	15.8
Highest grade (%)		
8 or below	7.1	20.0
9–11	32.1	45.0
12 or beyond	21.4	25.0
GED	39.3	10.0
Risk category (%)**		
Low	7.7	50.0
Moderate	46.2	44.4
High	42.3	5.6
Very high	3.8	0.0

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Forty-four of the offenders in the sample had a risk/needs assessment available (i.e., a total of five experimental cases and three control cases were missing). Using the standardized Multi-Health Systems (MHS) cutoff scores, offenders were classified according to their overall risk categories: low risk, moderate risk, high risk, and very high risk. Low risk included offenders with LSI-R scores of 0–13 (or YLSI scores of 0–8), moderate risk included offenders with LSI-R scores of 14–23 (or YLSI scores of 9–22), high risk included offenders with LSI-R scores of 24–33 (or YLSI scores of 23–34), and very high risk included offenders with LSI-R scores of 34 and above (or YLSI scores of 35 and above).

Eleven of the 52 offenders in the sample also received a domain-specific needs assessment (i.e., a total five experimental and six control cases). The types of needs assessments used included the Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory (SASSI) ($N=8$), the Behavioral Assessment Scale for Children II (BASC-II) ($N=2$), and a risk measure for sexual recidivism ($N=1$). Past mental health treatment between the groups is very similar (45.2% for the experimental group and 47.6% for the control group, $p > 0.05$) as well as those currently receiving treatment (28.6% and 19.4%, $p > 0.05$).

Table 2 presents criminal history information. The probationers supervised by the EPICS officers are compared to the probationers supervised by the control officers. The category 'Other' under the type of offense includes two status offenses, one public intoxication, and one criminal mischief. Fifty of the 52 offenders received a sentence of straight probation for the current offense. The other two offenders received residential placement in conjunction with probation. In both groups the majority of offenders were first arrested at an early age, have previously been on community supervision and served time in a secure facility. There are no significant differences in the past criminal histories or current offense/severity between groups.

Core correctional skills

Table 3 indicates the prevalence, number, and average time officers spent discussing criminogenic needs with offenders. The probationers supervised by the EPICS

Table 2. Criminal history information of EPICS ($N=31$) and the control probationers ($N=21$).

Offense information	EPICS	Control
Mean age of first arrest (SD)	18.0 (7.9)	16.1 (4.4)
Mean prior commitments (SD)	1.6 (1.9)	1.1 (2.1)
Mean prior community supervisions (SD)	3.5 (3.0)	2.4 (2.0)
Mean prior technical violations (SD)	1.1 (2.3)	1.0 (1.9)
Current offense severity (%)		
Felony	51.6	47.6
Misdemeanor	45.2	47.6
Status	3.2	4.8
Current type of offense (%)		
Driving	38.7	23.8
Violent	45.2	33.3
Property	29.0	14.3
Drug	6.5	4.8
Sex	0.0	14.3
Other	6.5	9.5

Table 3. Criminogenic needs targeted by EPICS ($N=6$) and the control officers ($N=4$).

	Session	EPICS	Control	N	Coefficient
Probation officer targets criminogenic needs (%)	1	95.7	18.2	34	21.511 (χ^2)**
	2	100	57.1	25	8.766 (χ^2)**
	3	100	80	14	1.938 (χ^2)
Mean number of criminogenic needs targeted (SD)	1	1.5 (1.2)	0.1 (0.3)	46	4.942 (t)**
	2	1.9 (1.3)	0.6 (1.0)	27	2.787 (t)**
	3	1.4 (0.7)	1.4 (1.4)	14	0.030 (t)
Mean minutes spent on criminogenic needs (SD)	1	2.8 (2.2)	0.6 (2.3)	46	3.443 (t)**
	2	5.9 (4.3)	1.2 (2.5)	27	3.237 (t)**
	3	7.3 (3.4)	2.7 (3.1)	14	2.824 (t)*

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

officers are compared to the probationers supervised by the control officers. During the first two sessions, trained officers were significantly more likely to spend more time targeting more criminogenic needs than untrained officers. During the third session, the only significant difference between the groups is trained officers spent more time addressing criminogenic needs than untrained officers. However, the finding that targeting criminogenic needs and the number of criminogenic needs addressed do not differ significantly between the two groups during session three is likely an artifact of the small sample size ($N=14$). Clearly, the preliminary results demonstrate that officers trained in EPICS outperform untrained officers in the area of targeting criminogenic needs.

The prevalence of probation officers using core correctional practices across the three audiotaped sessions with offenders is summarized in Table 4. The probationers supervised by the EPICS officers are compared to the probationers supervised by the control officers. The majority of all officers (97.8%) used open-ended questions throughout the meeting, and all officers were also very likely to keep a calm voice throughout the duration of the session (98.9% of the time).

Table 4. Cognitive/behavioral techniques used by EPICS ($N=6$) and the control officers ($N=4$).

	Session	EPICS	Control	N	χ^2
Identifies pro-criminal thoughts/beliefs (%)	1	28.6	100.0	8	1.905
	2	50.0	100.0	3	0.750
	3	75.0	0.0	6	0.375
Challenges pro-criminal thoughts/beliefs (%)	1	45.8	25.0	28	0.608
	2	92.9	0.0	17	11.839***
	3	83.3	25.0	10	3.403*
Reinforces pro-social	1	80.0	40.0	20	2.857*
	2	93.8	50.0	20	4.804**
	3	100.0	66.7	9	2.250
Explores long and short	1	63.6	25.0	15	1.759
	2	66.7	0.0	13	4.952**
	3	75.0	0.0	6	3.000*
Encourages or praises	1	92.3	33.3	16	5.565**
	2	100.0	0.0	7	7.000***
	3	100.0	50.0	4	1.333

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

There were no significant differences between groups in identifying the offenders' pro-criminal thoughts or beliefs, however, there are significant differences in challenging those pro-criminal thoughts or beliefs during session two ($\chi^2 = 11.839$, $p < 0.01$) and session three ($\chi^2 = 3.403$, $p = 0.07$). This indicates that trained officers were able to improve their performance over time in using core correctional practices to explore offender pro-criminal thoughts. In the two component areas of reinforcing prosocial behavior and encouraging or praising compliance, trained officers were significantly more likely to outperform untrained officers during sessions one and two. During session three the significance of each component diminished, however, this is also likely a problem of sample size ($N=9$ and $N=4$, respectively). Finally, although there was not an initial significant difference between groups in exploring long- and short-term consequences at session one, a significant relationship did develop during session two ($\chi^2 = 4.952$, $p = 0.03$) and session three ($\chi^2 = 3.000$, $p = 0.08$).

Officer use of structural and behavioral techniques of assigning homework and role-playing with offenders are described in Table 5. Trained officers clearly outperform untrained officers in both skills. Untrained officers never used these skills.

Discussion

The preliminary findings of this study indicate officers trained in the EPICS model demonstrate a more consistent use of core correctional practices. Specifically, EPICS officers are significantly more likely than control officers to spend time targeting criminogenic needs during contact sessions. Although there were no significant differences between groups in identifying the client's antisocial thoughts or beliefs, there are significant differences in challenging those antisocial thoughts or beliefs during the second and third sessions. When considering behavioral practices, EPICS trained officers are more likely to reinforce prosocial behavior and encourage and

Table 5. Structural/behavioral techniques used by EPICS ($N=6$) and the control officers ($N=4$).

	Session	EPICS	Control
Role plays (%)	1	0.0	0.0
	2	21.1	0.0
	3	22.2	0.0
Assigns homework (%)	1	34.5	0.0
	2	10.5	0.0
	3	33.3	0.0

praise pro-social behavior. Furthermore, there was not a significant difference between groups in exploring long- and short-term consequences at session one; however, a significant relationship did emerge in later sessions. Finally, a cursory look at the officer use of structural and behavioral techniques of assigning homework and role-playing with clients clearly shows trained officers outperform untrained officers in both skills; untrained officers never once used either skill.

The preliminary results of this study underscore the importance of training and coaching as an on-going process to assist agencies in gaining adherence to the risk-need-responsivity (RNR) principles and core correctional practices. EPICS training modules taught the principles of effective intervention with an emphasis on the targeting of high-risk clients, identifying their criminogenic needs, and using cognitive-behavioral approaches. Specific skills included relationship building, cognitive restructuring, problem solving, and structured skill building. It was gratifying to see that EPICS-trained officers spent more time targeting criminogenic needs during contact sessions and also outperformed untrained officers on every skill. Furthermore, trained officers became more proficient with using the skills over time, where there was little to no change in the untrained group.

Interestingly, for many of the skill competencies, the significant difference between the two groups did not appear until the second and third sessions. The implementation literature and similar training models would argue that this is not coincidental (see Bonta *et al.* 2010, Bourgon *et al.* 2010, Robinson *et al.* 2011, Trotter 1996, 2006). As demonstrated in the early analysis of this on-going study, the real opportunity for officers to develop and become proficient in core correctional practices occurred as a result of the coaching sessions. To illustrate, the EPICS-trained officers initially experienced difficulties with challenging pro-criminal attitudes and values. Once identified as a deficit, the UCCI Research Associate provided a booster training on cognitive restructuring during a coaching session. Specifically, officers observed demonstrations of the technique and were able to practice the skill with feedback. The impact of this additional training and practice was reflected in the fact that officers were more likely to use cognitive restructuring techniques in subsequent audiotapes. This same experience occurred with the officers' use of structuring skills and behavioral techniques.

It should be noted that this probation department has exceptional leadership. In addition to coaching sessions provided by the UCCI, the agency took the initiative to also develop several peer coaching mechanisms. Therefore, an equally valuable part of the coaching process occurred internally and within the agency. For example, the supervisors identified a 'core correctional practice of the month' that was reviewed in staff meetings and peer coaching sessions. In sum, the pilot study has

suggested that both training and coaching are key components in the adoption of the EPICS model.

Since the initial pilot project, other jurisdictions have adopted the EPICS model. The expansion to different jurisdictions has confirmed the importance of training and coaching. There are several lessons learned that have allowed for a refinement of the coaching process. These lessons and accompanying refinements are briefly described below.

First, it is evident coaching sessions need to have a clear structure. The initial coaching sessions were simply a review of the model and related skills. There was not a formal process in place, which made consistency across coaches a challenge. It was also difficult to train supervisors in the coaching process. To increase structure and ultimately the consistency of coaching sessions, a session outline was developed and implemented. The outline provides coaches and supervisors with a clear direction for facilitation of the session including a check-in, a review of the officers' use of the model on most recent audiotapes, a booster training on a specific skill identified on the audiotapes to be an area of need for most officers, and finally, the assignment of a specific practice opportunity for officers on their next audiotape. Defining the components of the coaching process similar to the components of the EPICS model also provided regular review of the model and demonstrated the structure of a session.

Another component of the coaching structure is to increase the involvement of the supervisors during the on-going coaching sessions. The external coaches model the structure and content during the first two sessions, the supervisors and external coaches co-facilitate sessions three and four, and the supervisors take the lead role for the final session.

Second, external coaches need to develop the skills of supervisors to both deliver the EPICS model and coach others on the model. Thus, three supervisor-specific components were developed. The first included a designated time period at the end of each coaching session to allow for external coaches and supervisors to process the coaching session and identify barriers to implementation, possible solutions and next steps. A pre-coaching session conference call was also added. Two days before the large group coaching session, supervisors meet with the external coach via phone or video-conference to review the audiotape feedback and key skills to be reviewed during the coaching session. Furthermore, the coaching session outline is discussed, roles and responsibilities identified, content clarified, and feedback processed. This session is intended to enhance supervisor 'buy-in' for the coaching and modeling process, aids in skill development, and also demonstrates to the officers that supervisory involvement and support is present. For similar reasons, the third piece was added which requires that supervisors carry a small caseload to allow for practice of the EPICS model.

Third, coaching sessions with overall feedback to the group of trained officers is insufficient in and of itself. Individual feedback to each officer on the use of the model is necessary. Initially, during the coaching session officers received overall feedback based on all officers who submitted an audiotape. Sites are now encouraged to have the supervisor and respective officer review each audiotape submitted along with the written feedback provided by the external coach. Sites who have implemented this procedure find that officer skill development occurs faster along with officer self-efficacy surrounding the use of the model.

Finally, agencies must have a plan to continue internal coaching mechanisms once external coaching involvement ceases. Prior to the last coaching session,

external coaches and supervisors develop a thorough internal coaching plan that will begin after the final coaching session with the UCCI.

The EPICS implementation project is consistent with previous sources that have discussed implementation guidelines (Gingiss 1992, Gendreau *et al.* 1999, Mihalic *et al.* 2004, Heikkila 2008, Waal and Counet 2009). This initial study demonstrates several key organizational factors must be in place if an agency chooses to adopt a new model of community supervision. These factors include agency and internal coaches support for the model, as well as the willingness and ability to efficiently solve problems as needed. Program-specific considerations must be made in terms of adequate resources for training, coaching, and workload and/or caseload changes as well. Furthermore, it is important to recognize and appreciate that implementation of the model and the development of skills occurs gradually as officers and supervisors become more proficient and increase confidence surrounding the model. The preliminary results of this study support earlier implementation literature that emphasizes the role of management (Gendreau *et al.* 1999). The pilot agency had key personnel that enhanced staff motivation, had intimate knowledge of both the agency and staff along with knowledge of the EPICS model, and served as models for the officers. Like other studies, the early results of this on-going study demonstrate the importance of supervisor and officer collaborative involvement throughout the process (Heikkila 2008). The most common theme re-appearing throughout the initial results of the study and the lessons learned is the value of the coaching sessions, and the support and involvement of the supervisors. The ability of an agency to participate in coaching sessions and provide internal coaching is a critical ingredient for success. Finally, agencies should develop quality assurance procedures to monitor officer adherence to the model and evaluate the overall effectiveness of the program.

It is important to note that there are several limitations to this study. First, as this was a pilot project, only a small number of officers (and offenders) participated. Second, there was a significant amount of attrition regarding audiotapes; a total of 93 audiotapes were coded with 52% for the first session, 31% for the second session and only 17% for the third session. Second, random selection was not used in the methodological design of the pilot as officers recruited cases from their current caseload. Third, there were significantly more lower-risk clients in the control group compared to the experimental group. Future research endeavors could address some of these limitations and continue to move the field of community corrections toward evidence-based practices.

Notes

1. The EPICS model was originally developed by Paula Smith and Christopher T. Lowenkamp, and has been revised since this time by the UCCI. Additional training materials have been developed to adapt the EPICS model for case managers and for use with families.
2. We also collected outcome data and measures of pro-criminal attitudes and relationship skills as part of the pilot project. Due to small sample size, the data will be combined with four current UCCI research sites and reported out at a later date.

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