

Probation and Parole Officer Adherence to the Core Correctional Practices: An Evaluation of 755 Offender-Officer Interactions

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In response to Martinson's (1974) review of offender treatment literature and subsequent proclamation that "nothing works," there has been a growing movement to investigate the effectiveness of correctional interventions (Cullen & Gendreau, 2000). Most notably Canadian psychologists Paul Gendreau, Robert Ross, Don Andrews, and James Bonta challenged the "nothing works" doctrine by leading an effort to delineate the characteristics that distinguish effective from ineffective treatment (Andrews et al., 1990). Their focus on knowledge cumulation and "evidence-based corrections" has facilitated the identification of "what works" within correctional rehabilitation, including the specific criteria for optimizing effectiveness along clinically and psychologically relevant dimensions (Smith, Gendreau, & Swartz, 2009). Below, we summarize these findings, collectively referred to as the "principles of effective intervention" (Andrews, 1995; Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Gendreau, 1996).

Scholars have used these principles to develop a set of core correctional practices (CCPs) that are designed to increase the therapeutic potential of correctional programs (Dowden & Andrews, 2004). Since their inception in the 1980s, these practices have evolved as a result of on-going empirical evaluation. Andrews and Kiessling (1980) first introduced five CCPs (*effective use of authority, anticriminal modeling and reinforcement, problem solving, use of community resources, and interpersonal relationships*) that were later expanded into a training curriculum (see Andrews & Carvell, 1998). In 1989, Gendreau and Andrews added to this list of practices with the development of the Correctional Program Assessment Inventory (CPAI). The CPAI is an instrument designed to evaluate how closely correctional treatment programs adhere to the known principles of effective correctional treatment (Smith & Schweitzer, 2012). The CPAI has gone through several revisions, including the CPAI-2000, and most recently the CPAI-2010 (Gendreau, Andrews, & Theriault, 2010).

The eight service delivery skills identified in the CPAI-2010 are:

- **Anticriminal modeling** – officers model for offenders by engaging in prosocial behaviors and reinforcing them when they do the same.
- **Effective reinforcement** – officers reinforce a specific behavior that includes immediate statements of approval and support and the reasons why this behavior is desirable followed by consideration of the short- and long-term benefits associated with continued use of the behavior.
- **Effective disapproval** – officers communicate disapproval for a specific behavior that includes immediate statements of disapproval and the reasons why this behavior is undesirable followed by consideration of the short- and long-term costs associated with continued use of the behavior and a clear demonstration of an alternate, prosocial behavior.
- **Effective use of authority** – officers guide offenders toward compliance, which includes focusing their message on the behavior exhibited, being direct and specific concerning their demands and specifying the offender's choices and attendant consequences.
- **Structured learning** – officers use behavioral strategies to assist offenders in developing prosocial skills to avoid or manage high-risk situations. Officers teach skills in a structured manner that involves defining, modeling, and rehearsing the skill followed by the constructive feedback. Likewise, offenders must practice the skill in increasingly difficult situations.

- **Problem solving** – a specific social skill that officers teach offenders to address a variety of high-risk situations.
- **Cognitive restructuring** – occurs when officers help offenders generate descriptions of problematic situations, the related thoughts and feelings, and then help offenders identify risky thinking and practice more prosocial alternatives.
- **Relationship skills** – effective officers possess several critical relationship skills including warm, open, nonjudgmental, empathetic, flexible, engaging, solution-focused, and directive to name a few.

These CCPs have been validated on more than 700 individual adult and juvenile programs by correlating scores with offender recidivism (Lowenkamp, 2004; Lowenkamp, Latessa, & Smith, 2006; Matthews, Hubbard, & Latessa, 2001). For the most part, these CCPs were applied to correctional programs, focusing on the treatment component of the programming. Taxman (2002) outlined how these core correctional practices could be employed by supervision staff as part of their routine interactions with offenders, and demonstrated the effectiveness of reduced offender outcomes through an application focused on relationship skills, problem solving and cognitive restructuring with attention to criminogenic needs (Taxman, 2008). Such research on CCPs has resulted in recent initiatives to train community supervision officers to use these CCPs in their face-to-face interactions with offenders, including Proactive Community Supervision (Taxman, Shepardson, & Byrne, 2004), the Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision (STICS) model (Bourgon, Bonta, Ruge, Scott, & Yessine, 2010), the Staff Training Aimed at Reducing Re-Arrest (STARR) model (Robinson, Vanbenschoten, Alexander, & Lowenkamp, 2011), and the Effective Practices in Community Supervision (EPICS) model (Smith, Schweitzer, Labrecque, & Latessa, 2012). Inherent in all of these initiatives is the idea that training on CCPs will influence the skills used by officers during contact sessions with offenders.

Our Study

Here, we present the findings of a study examining the effect training on CCPs has on subsequent officer use of skills. Participants in the study include 44 probation and parole officers from four regional juvenile and adult community supervision departments in one large mid-western state. A site coordinator assigned officers to one of two groups - trained in the EPICS model or untrained.

All of the officers assigned to the trained group attended a three-day EPICS training, which included visual presentations, demonstrations of skills, workbook exercises, and several opportunities for officers to practice skills and receive feedback. Following the initial training, officers and supervisors participated in 24 monthly coaching sessions led by University of Cincinnati Corrections Institute (UCCI).

Use of Core Correctional Practices

In order to evaluate the impact of the training initiative and coaching process, all officers (including untrained officers) submitted audio-recordings of interactions with offenders. Officers submitted at least one audio monthly and began submission six months after receiving training. Trained UCCI staff listened to each audiotape and measured adherence to the eight service delivery skills identified in the CPAI-2010 (Gendreau et al., 2010). Specifically, items were scored as 0 if the officer had the opportunity to use the skill, but did not, .5 if the officer used the skill, but missed major steps, and 1 if the officer demonstrated proficient use of the skill. Yes or no items were scored as 0 = no and 1 = yes. Only items where the officer had an opportunity to use the skill in the session were included. On each audiotape, the total scores for each skill were divided by the total number of items in each skill that the officer had the opportunity to use in the session. This produced a range of potential scores for each skill from .00 to 1.00. In order to obtain only one score per skill for each officer, all of the scores for each skill were added together for each officer and divided by the total number of audiotapes he or she submitted.

There were 24 trained and 20 untrained officers that submitted a total of 755 recorded offender-officer interactions. The two groups of officers were compared on the variables of gender, race, and years of service. No significant differences were found.

Table 1

Comparison of Officer Adherence to Eight CPAI-2010 Service Delivery Skills by Group Type (N = 44)

Skill	Trained			Untrained			df	t	p	Cohen's d
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD				
Anticriminal modeling	19	.10	.14	8	.00	.00	18.0 ^a	-2.94 ^a	.009	1.4
Effective reinforcement	24	.62	.10	20	.64	.12	42	.51	.614	-0.2
Effective disapproval	24	.21	.23	15	.03	.06	27.7 ^a	-3.68 ^a	.001	1.2
Problem solving	21	.19	.29	20	.03	.08	23.1 ^a	-2.48 ^a	.021	0.9
Structured learning	24	.58	.18	20	.25	.14	42	-6.76	<.001	2.1
Effective use of authority	24	.91	.06	20	.91	.10	30.7 ^a	.06 ^a	.956	0.0
Cognitive restructuring	24	.28	.19	20	.04	.09	33.7 ^a	-5.64 ^a	<.001	1.7
Relationship skills	24	.69	.12	20	.39	.16	42	-7.26	<.001	2.1

Note: ^a The t and df were adjusted because the variances were not equal.

Table 1 shows trained officers were rated significantly higher than untrained officers on their adherence to the six CCPs of *anticriminal modeling*, *effective disapproval*, *problem solving*, *structured learning*, *cognitive restructuring*, and *relationship skills* ($p < .05$). The effect size, *d*, of these group differences ranges from .9 to 2.1. Trained officers did not differ from untrained officers on the ratings for adherence to the two skills of *effective reinforcement* ($p = .614$) or *effective use of authority* ($p = .956$).

Table 1 also shows trained officers were rated satisfactorily 50% of the time or more in four of the eight CCPs: *structured learning* ($M = .58$), *effective reinforcement* ($M = .62$), *relationship skills* ($M = .69$), and *effective use of authority* ($M = .91$). In comparison, untrained officers were rated satisfactorily by this same standard in only two areas: *effective reinforcement* ($M = .64$) and *effective use of authority* ($M = .91$).

Conclusion

In this study, both the trained and untrained officers displayed high fidelity ($M > .50$) in the two CCPs of *effective reinforcement* and *effective use of authority*. This finding suggests community supervision agencies may already be effective in training officers in these two skill areas or that the role of the community supervision officer generally supports these skills, regardless of any additional CCP training (i.e., EPICS). Further, the near equivalence of the two groups ratings indicate there may not be any additional benefit in these two areas from the added CCP training beyond what is achieved through the current standard practices.

The trained officers received statistically higher ratings in the CCPs of *anticriminal modeling*, *effective disapproval*, *problem solving*, *structured learning*, *cognitive restructuring*, and *relationship skills*. Future research should examine the extent to which the use of CCPs is directly related to training in the EPICS model or similar community supervision models.

Despite significant improvements in skill usage, the trained group was only rated satisfactorily 50% of the time

or more on two additional CCPs compared to the untrained group: structured learning and relationship skills. This suggests that training and coaching alone are not enough to improve officer service delivery skills. Future research should examine the importance of additional factors that may influence the likelihood of successful implementation of CCPs within community supervision including organizational harmony, agency response to new initiatives, staff turnover, and managerial support. Finally, future research should continue to evaluate the effectiveness of CCP training on officer use of skills and the ratings of these skills should be correlated with offender recidivism.

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