

**Understanding the Risk Need, Responsivity (RNR) model and crime desistance
perspective and integrating them into correctional practice**

Ralph C. Serin¹ and Caleb D. Lloyd²

¹Carleton University

²Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science, Swinburne University of Technology

Forthcoming publication as a National Institute of Corrections Technical Report.

For more than three decades, the Risk, Need, and Responsivity (RNR) framework has been the predominant model in corrections for the development of risk and need assessment instruments (i.e., third and fourth generation instruments, in which risk scores can be meaningfully used to guide case decisions in practice; Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2006; Bonta & Andrews, 2016). Broadly, the RNR principles reflect the essential guiding principles for effective correctional intervention (Gendreau, 1996). Specifically, RNR represents the *who*, *what*, and *how* of correctional interventions. In relation to programming, Smith, Gendreau & Swartz (2009) have demonstrated that more effective outcomes occur when intervention implements the principles of risk, need, and responsivity. In relation to risk assessment, the RNR model has a strong track record of guiding practically useful risk tools by using empirical knowledge about the factors associated with future crime, and evidence of the change factors that drive reductions in recidivism following programs.

The RNR model is an approach to enhancing correctional client change. The model's purpose and focus is on assisting practical correctional decisions about how to organize and deliver programs. Although the RNR model itself is not a conceptual model about risk assessment *per se*, it identifies the primary (i.e., most important) risk factors (Andrews & Bonta, 2010), and has gathered empirical evidence that these must be successfully addressed in order to achieve offender change. As well, RNR is not a specific theoretical explanation of offender change; instead, RNR is best viewed as the practical application of the underlying Personal, Interpersonal, and Community Reinforcement (PIC-R) theory, the purpose and focus of which is to explain offender change in terms of client associations and attitudes, and changes in the contingencies for criminal versus prosocial behavior (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Nonetheless, the importance of RNR cannot be overstated as the field continues to embrace an evidence-based approach, and RNR has been an explicitly evidence-focused framework from its inception (Cullen, Myer, & Latessa, 2009).

Juxtaposed against this impressive body of work has been increasing interest in *crime desistance*, the process by which offenders cease offending behaviours. This strength-based work has been represented by two inter-related areas; quantitative and observational qualitative research on crime desistance (Maruna, 2010) and writings that have developed the concepts of the Good Lives Model (Ward, Mann, & Gannon, 2007). To date, much discussion has focussed on the relative merits of one perspective over the other, with many taking the view that these frameworks naturally compete due to fundamentally opposing assumptions about the nature of criminal behaviour. Cullen (2012), appropriately, argued a presumed “winner” should be determined empirically by weighing the balance of evidence in terms of achieving the greatest reductions in re-offending. But, Cullen (2012) also conceded there is an ongoing need for creative development of alternative or complementary approaches.

Essentially, we argue that a more beneficial discussion centers on whether these two perspectives may represent opposite ends of a continuum (e.g., the processes of crime acquisition versus crime cessation), rather than competing zero-sum philosophies. In other words, we suggest that both perspectives are required to fully understand offender behaviour and trajectories over time. This paper proposes that these approaches are complementary, each providing important information regarding the assessment, intervention, and supervision of offenders (e.g., see Porporino, 2010).

How do limitations and criticisms highlight how the approaches may be integrated?

First, the application of the RNR approach within correctional intervention consistently yields reductions in future re-offending of about 10% (Aos, Miller, & Drake, 2006). This is noteworthy, and places RNR at the forefront of strong evidence for effectiveness, but is at the same time arguably limited. Hence, Porporino (2010) wondered if correctional intervention may have reached a ceiling, as has similarly been observed among static risk assessment instruments (i.e., combining increasing numbers of static risk variables begins to lead to diminishing returns for prediction). Both areas of correctional practice raise the question regarding whether new content is required for

further advancement of the field. For programming, the issue of strength-based constructs has been proposed (Ward & Marshall, 2007), whereas for risk assessment, acute dynamic risks and protective factors have been put forward (Serin, Lloyd, & Chadwick, 2016) as ways to improve effectiveness. It is intriguing that the issue of client strengths is becoming increasingly of interest to corrections researchers and practitioners. Relatedly, the application of Core Correctional Practices (e.g., role clarification, effective use of approval and disapproval, and challenging procriminal thinking) by parole officers accounts for a further 13% reduction in re-offending (Chadwick, DeWolf & Serin, 2015), raising the notion that gains are likely going to be incremental, not quantum in nature.

However, these modest indices of efficacy are at odds with other research such as a recent BJS report that tracked 43,000 federal offenders placed on community supervision in 2005 and showed 57% of these individuals remained crime free five years later. This finding suggests that under the conditions of standard correctional practice, individual change occurs among a slight majority of the offender population. As such, this base rate highlights how traditional RNR correctional practice and crime desistance perspectives serve to both compete with, and complement each other: RNR-based approaches enhance outcomes among a population that is already slightly biased toward achieving desistance, whereas the crime desistance perspective offers a compelling understanding of individual change processes that can occur in concert with, outside of, and/or despite correctional intervention. The limits of each approach thus suggest promise for potentially achieving strong integration of the many different components that may influence change, but little is known regarding the process of offender change (Lloyd & Serin, 2012), and the field is currently unable to forecast which offenders would best benefit from directive (RNR) versus naturalistic strategies.

Unsurprisingly, given these two pieces of a multifaceted puzzle have not yet been well connected, the field of offender change continues to evolve, and both areas (RNR and desistance) have received criticism. For example, some believe that RNR does

not sufficiently address offender strengths and that programming may be too prescriptive (Ward & Marshall, 2007); this criticism may reflect problems with how RNR has been operationalized in practice, rather than its underlying conceptual components (Polaschek, 2012). In contrast, the desistance literature is appealing in its strength-based context, but in general it may “miss” key aspects of factors relevant for understanding criminal thinking and change (Cullen, 2009). In terms of building strong empirical support, the desistance literature reflects more qualitative research with smaller samples of unique subgroups of offenders. The seminal work by Sampson and Laub (1993) is an exception but the sample was collected more than 50 years ago, raising questions regarding current generalizability. More recent research has highlighted correlates of desistance (not predictors, which require longitudinal follow-up designs) and has primarily been completed with samples of repetitive, but lower risk, property offenders. How this desistance research applies to higher risk violent offenders remains unclear.

Nonetheless, these two themes of research, arguably, both helpfully contribute to the field’s ongoing understanding of offending behaviour. In support of this contention, two recently developed and implemented community supervision curricula (i.e., Next Generation of Community Supervision, National Institute of Corrections; and Soaring2, George Mason University) have purposefully integrated desistance themes with RNR concepts and incorporated them into the same program to train parole and probation officers (POs) regarding core correctional practice. Both curricula focus on the assessment of criminogenic needs as the main priority within supervision practice, but augment this with a consideration of engagement/motivation as well as the need for clients to gain agency and begin to view themselves as capable to changing from their criminal identity. The remainder of this paper is designed to further outline this integration, and provide the knowledge background to assist POs to incorporate RNR and desistance into their ongoing work with clients.

What do we know about RNR?

Risk, Need, and Responsivity are terms coined by Andrews & Bonta (2010) to reflect the underlying principles of effective intervention with offenders. Grounded in empirical findings from meta-analyses (a procedure that combines the findings of multiple studies), the RNR model ensures that 1) intervention is provided to higher risk clients because this strategy yields the greatest reductions in recidivism whereas targeting low risk clients is iatrogenic (the Risk Principle), 2) intervention targets relevant and changeable risk factors (called *criminogenic needs*) because targeting non-criminogenic needs fails to reduce recidivism (the Need Principle), and finally, 3a) intervention follows strategies that have proved to be effective for correctional clients (the General Responsivity Principle), and 3b) intervention efficacy is maximized by having providers attend to clients' key individual characteristics (the Specific Responsivity Principle). Each of these principles is important in isolation, but when implemented together, these features yield the greatest reduction in recidivism (Smith, Gendreau, & Swartz, 2009). Although a primary focus within the RNR model is to deliver intervention that attempts to alter criminal thinking, consideration of factors such as employment/education and substance abuse highlight the need to address commitment to social convention and self-regulation, respectively.

What do we know about desistance?

Currently, meta-analyses are not available that validate factors that predict desistance. However, Maruna (2010) nicely summarized the research literature, presenting a variety of factors that are related to client success. Across numerous studies, the predominant themes reflect clients' embracing prosocial and positive community situations such as stable employment and relationships (i.e., social capital), as well as a general belief they can succeed, with some personal effort (i.e., agency). A commitment to these resources and internal beliefs is considered to be the key component that ultimately leads to the development of a new, prosocial identity (i.e., prosocial citizen instead of active offender). The timing and trajectory of this change process is not well understood and is likely to vary across individuals. From a

correctional system perspective, the desistance perspective offers a more passive change model in that it posits that clients are responsible to identify, embrace, and pursue their own internal drivers for change. By contrast, RNR actively focuses on criminal thinking as the driver of change, which is then conceptualized as an explicit target for intervention.

Yet, it must be acknowledged that within both perspectives, researchers have been unable to identify consistent and substantial evidence that change processes can be adequately measured (Lloyd, Hanby, & Serin, 2014; Serin, Lloyd, Helmus, Derkzen, & Luong, 2013). Within desistance research, it is of some concern that quantitative measurement of key characteristics have not been standardized, relying mainly on qualitative research, reflecting that this research is still exploring and identifying key themes. As such, research findings with large samples, heterogeneous in terms of type of index offense, are generally lacking. Large longitudinal studies do exist (Farrington, 2005; Laub & Sampson, 1993), but application of these findings is limited by the lack of evidence that samples have remained similar across decades in terms of offense type preference, ethnic composition, age, and risk level. As well, social structures related to change in past decades (e.g., military service, traditional onset age of marriage) may not be present or equally influential today.

Summary comparison of RNR and desistance approaches

	RNR	Desistance
Theory	Identifies risk factors (criminogenic needs), with evidence that the primary mechanism for change is the reduction of these factors.	Best exemplified in GLM which identifies specific client goods (i.e., primary human goals) but also highlights social capital as the mechanism for change.

Key difference	Fixing problems (criminal thinking, poor self-regulation, egocentricity)	Redemptive script (change is possible when client creates new meaning of self through prosocial support and stability).
Change Process	Targets criminal thinking and peers in a way that increases prosocial skills, and changes how clients manage risk situations.	Enhances social supports to increase agency and reinforce effort which, with success, leads to identity change.
Change Action	Active and directed. (deliberate)	Passive and experiential. (naturalistic)
Change Focus	Internal then external. Considered at the individual level.	External then internal. Considered at the societal level.
Empirical Evidence	Strong.	Limited.
Offender Heterogeneity	Assumes offenders have unique characteristics distinct from non-offenders that influence criminal propensity.	Assumes that offenders are not different than non-offenders (i.e., homogeneity in criminal propensity).
Offender Samples	Very large and diverse but more research needed that addresses potentially	Limited. Specific need for research across genders and race, and serious violent offenders.

	unique factors such as gender and race.	
Potential Limitations	Without client engagement, can be perceived as prescriptive. Providing adequate dosage linked to client risk may be challenging.	Assumes the opportunity for change will result in change. Limited agreement regarding standardized measurement of constructs.
Primary Focus	Risk management.	Strength-based (but these must mitigate criminal propensity).

How to integrate these themes?

Porporino (2010) conceded that there are limits to the effectiveness of current programming and provided a generally optimistic perspective that there would be enhanced utility to adopting a strength-based approach. Nonetheless, he also appropriately raised important questions that warrant consideration in the next iteration of intervention strategies in corrections. At this point, we believe it is reasonable to assert that desistance-based constructs and interventions could play a viable role in these new strategies. For example, the Soaring2 and Next Generation curricula for community supervision training reflect such an integration. Specifically, these trainings focus on effective practices from RNR, but require staff to conceptualize such intervention through a motivational and strength-based lens that encourages clients to consider and work towards agentic goals and a new identity. Within the current landscape of empirical evidence, we believe this balance offers the most justifiable approach, given the well-known efficacy of the human service-focused RNR

model (i.e., skill-building and training interventions), and the compelling, but limited, understanding of how to potentially integrate a strength-based focus within a generally punitive correctional system.

Summary and Next Steps

From this review, our hope is that it is apparent that RNR and desistance research are fundamentally linked in their core focus despite their apparent differences, i.e., both strive toward the same goal to assist individuals to cease offending behaviour. Although current efforts (founded on the RNR model) certainly yield prosocial change and thus improve public safety, these efforts are admittedly modest. Whereas, at present, the empirical nod supports the RNR approach, the crime desistance agenda provides exciting additional constructs, albeit not well defined or measured, that may assist practitioners to achieve this goal. We argue that next steps in this agenda must be more integrative by helping POs incorporate these themes into correctional practice, but also include improved measurement to permit researchers to better identify which offenders change, as well as how and why they change.

References

- Andrews, D. A. and James Bonta (2010) *The psychology of criminal conduct*, 5th ed. New Providence, NJ: LexisNexis/Matthew Bender.
- Andrews, D. A., James Bonta, J. Stephen Wormith, and Craig Dowden (2010) 'The Risk-Need-Responsibility (RNR) Model: Does adding the Good Lives Model contribute to crime prevention?', unpublished paper, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.
- Aos, S., Miller, M., & Drake, E. (2006) *Evidence-based public policy options to reduce future prison construction, criminal justice costs and crime rates*. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.
- Chadwick, N., Dewolf, A., & Serin, R. (2015). Effectively Training Community Supervision Officers A Meta-Analytic Review of the Impact on Offender Outcome. *Criminal justice and behavior*, 42(10), 977-989.
- Cullen, F.T. (2012). Taking rehabilitation seriously: Creativity, science, and the challenge of offender change. *Punishment & Society*, 14, 94-114. DOI: 10.1177/1462474510385973
- Cullen, F.T., Myer, A.J., & Latessa, E.J. (2009). Eight Lessons from *Moneyball*: The High Cost of Ignoring Evidence-Based Corrections. *Victims and Offenders*, 4:197-213. DOI: 10.1080/15564880802612631
- Farrington, David P. (ed.) (2005) *Integrated developmental and life-course theories of offending: Advances in criminological theory* (Vol. 14). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Gendreau, P. (1996) 'The principles of effective intervention with offenders', in Alan.T. Harland (ed.), *Choosing correctional interventions that work: Defining the demand and evaluating the supply*, pp. 117-30. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Andrews, D.A., Bonta, J., & Wormith, J.S., (2006). The Recent Past and Near Future of Risk and/or Need Assessment. *CRIME & DELINQUENCY*, Vol. 52 No. 1, January 2006 7-27 DOI: 10.1177/0011128705281756
- Laub, John H. and Robert J. Sampson (2003) *Shared beginnings, divergent lives: Delinquent boys to age 70*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Lloyd, C.D., Hanby, L.J., & Serin, R.C. (2014). Rehabilitation group co-participants' risk levels are associated with offenders' treatment performance, treatment change, and recidivism. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 82*(2), 298-311.
- Lloyd, C. D., & Serin, R. C. (2012). Agency and outcome expectancies for crime desistance: Measuring offenders' personal beliefs about change. *Psychology, Crime and Law, 18*(6), 543-565. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2010.511221>
- Markman, J.A., Durose, M.R., Rantala, R.R., & Tiedt, A.D. (2016). Recidivism of Offenders Placed on Federal Community Supervision in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010
- Maruna, S. (2010). *Understanding desistance from crime*. A report for the Ministry of Justice and National Offender Management Services. Retrieved from: www.safeground.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/desistance-fact-sheet.pdf
- Polaschek, D. L. L. (2012). An appraisal of the risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model of offender rehabilitation and its application in correctional treatment. *Legal and Criminological Psychology, 17*, 1-17. doi: 10.1111/j.2044A8333.2011.02038.x
- Porporino, F.J. (2010) Bringing sense and sensitivity to corrections: from programmes to 'fix' offenders to services to support desistance. In *What else works? Creative work with offenders*, Jo Brayford, Francis Cowe, and John Deering (eds.). Cullompton, Devon, UK: Willan Publishing. ISBN 978-1-84392-766-2.
- Serin, R.C., Lloyd, C.D., Helmus, L., Derkzen, D., & Luong, D. (2013). Does intra-individual change predict offender recidivism? Searching for the Holy Grail in a review of offender change. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 18*(1), 32-53.
- Smith, P., Gendreau, P., & Swartz, K. (2009). Validating the principles of effective intervention: A systematic review of the contributions of meta-analysis in the field of corrections, *Victims and Offenders, 4*(2), 148-69.
- Ward, Tony, Ruth E. Mann, and Theresa A. Gannon (2007) The Good Lives Model of offender rehabilitation: Clinical implications', *Aggression and Violent Behavior 12*(1): 87-107.

Ward, T. & Marshall, W. (2007) 'Narrative identity and offender rehabilitation',
International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology 51(3):
279-97.

Ward, T. & Maruna, S. (2007) *Rehabilitation: Beyond the risk paradigm*. London:
Routledge.