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IS THE RNR MODEL SUPPOSED TO "FIX" PRISONERS *AND* PRISONS?

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Abstract

In the 35 years since the RNR principles were first published the RNR model remains the foremost framework for reducing recidivism for people in prison. Yet many prison environments have changed little in that time, remaining places of and for punishment, based on outdated and unaffordable ideas about how best to respond to offending. Efforts to improve safety of prison environments for staff and residents, and to enhance community outcomes through rehabilitation are significantly compromised by misalignment with the core philosophy and operating model for prisons. The RNR model has been criticized for failing to substantially reduce the number of people returning to prison. But arguably its implementation has been shaped around an environment intent on harming people rather than helping them. In this paper I suggest that the RNR model could never be the panacea that "reformed" both prisoners and prisons. Yet politicians and correctional executives often use claims of providing "RNR-based rehabilitation" as a defense against more fundamental change, while critics blame the RNR model itself for its modest impact. Creating safe, fair and decent prisons is a foundational activity of immediate importance to the safety and wellbeing of staff and prisoners alike, but the RNR's model—of reducing reoffending risk by providing human service to those who can most benefit from learning ways to weaken criminogenic needs and live a prosocial life—cannot be that foundation but needs to rest on it. The fundamental prison reform society needs cannot be achieved from inside the system alone. But the development of units, wings or prison regimes with a consistently positive social climate remains an important activity in the interim, along with providing RNR-based interventions in such environments rather than in hostile contexts, so that participants can ingrain new habits of thinking, feeling and behaving, rather than keeping them in a "deep freeze" until they are released.

Keywords: RNR model, social climate, prison reform, cognitive behavioural group programmes

Introduction

In the 35 years since the first publication of the Andrews et al. (1990) Risk Need and Responsivity principles, the RNR model has become the most widely adopted approach to reducing reoffending. But has it had the expected benefits for prisoners or society? Abolitionists remind us that imprisonment is an inherently harmful concept, but research on diverse prison systems and prison social climates supports the view that the degree to which prisons harm or help depends on how they are run (i.e., they may "both damage and repair"; Auty & Liebling, 2020, p. 358). Concerns are growing in some jurisdictions about the prisons upholding the most basic aspects of human rights in correctional regimes (e.g., Boshier, 2023; Taylor, 2025; Walton & Elliott, 2025). In this challenging context, is RNR even relevant?

In this paper I argue that the RNR model (still) outlines the most empirically supported, effective and direct guidance on how to help people gain the skills that can support them to move away from criminal lifestyles. But it is being used by correctional systems as a shield against accusations that they remain entirely places of—and for—punishment. In reality, RNR's influence on turning prisons into effective rehabilitation environments has only, and could only, be superficial. Prisons claim they adhere to the RNR model while remaining essentially environments that harm at worst or neglect at best. I briefly revisit the development of RNR, examine its impact in prisons, argue for the importance of prison environments in risk-reducing rehabilitation, and against the idea that RNR can change prison culture, concluding with some comments about the future of RNR in prisons.

A Brief History of the RNR Model

Superficially, the RNR model is well known in many correctional systems. Most often people know the model by its three core principles (Risk, Need and Responsivity; see Andrews et al., 1990) but from these three it was expanded to 15 principles (Bonta & Andrews, 2024). Nevertheless, people are often only familiar with the first three; an outdated and incomplete vision of the model.

The significance and importance of Andrews and Bonta's approach derives from largely ignoring intervention "brand names" (e.g., boot camp, anger management, employment) or other external features (e.g., community vs. prison, length, admission criteria), and instead categorizing what was going on *inside* procedures, programs and services (Dowden, 1998), producing meta-analyses of the risk, need, responsivity, integrity, and core correctional staff practices.

The model is underpinned by the General Personality and Cognitive Social Learning (GPCSL) framework (Bonta & Andrews, 2024), whose central premise is that criminal behavior is learned, typically in adverse early social conditions that promote antisocial behavior as adaptive for survival, and that fail to teach cognitive and behavioral skills that can both motivate and give easier access to rewarding prosocial alternatives.

RNR's Principle 7 (*General Responsivity*) specifies that interventions and services "employ behavioral, social learning and cognitive-behavioral influence and skill building strategies." (p. 186, Bonta & Andrews, 2024). It allows for breadth; RNR bridges learning theory/behaviorism—with an emphasis on reinforcement and punishment as the key agents of behavior change—and the subsequent "cognitive revolution" that saw a growing emphasis on people's thinking, emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and values as a focus for treatment. At the same time, learning theory extended into social learning

theory: people also learn from imitating behavior modelled by others (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, most effective RNR interventions require opportunities for people to learn new ways of thinking and behaving through modelling and imitation, and to practice them in social environments where they are rewarded until they become second nature.

The Modest Impact of RNR in Custodial Corrections

Jumping forward to today, RNR has ostensibly become "business as usual" in many jurisdictions. Prison systems seeking to claim policy alignment with the RNR model triage people based on level of risk and need using validated instruments, and then plug them into a place in the indicated intervention: most often a cognitive-behavioral group program (CBGP). The impact of this approach on recidivism has been modest at best.

One reason likely lies in poor implementation. There have been some conspicuous failures (e.g., p. 264, Bonta & Andrews, 2024) and less visible implementation problems are probably widespread. Maintaining the *quality* of RNR adherence needs continuous attention at a low level in the organization: regular professional supervision and quality assurance. These essential processes are seldom visible outside of the organization and are easily cut when resources are reduced or referral numbers balloon.

Even if RNR principles are implemented effectively, most people may still be released before they can be paired up with a suitable program, or are held in prison while they wait for a place (Shaskey, 2023). In New Zealand in 2021/22 fewer than a fifth of the total (daily) prison population took a place in a program. In the year ending June 2024, almost a quarter of new prison sentences recipients spent less than 6 months in prison. And almost half of the current population is on remand. In 2021, one-fifth of these prisoners was released on the day they are sentenced, on "time served" ("Court delays" 2022).

Finally, typical interventions derived from RNR's Principle 7 (*General Responsivity*) are variations of CBGPs. Most meta-analyses of CBGPs do not report on whether the "program" is a few hours a week for a few weeks in an otherwise criminogenic prison setting, or is part of a change-supportive environment (see Gannon et al., 2019, for an exception). CGBPs attended by people living in criminogenic social climates surely are at best, weak interventions (Day, 2020). Koehler and Lösel (2025, p. 20) noted that the recidivism outcomes for these programs appear somewhat diminished compared to earlier eras. They suggested that one explanation was that the "hardships that beset many justice systems, from government austerity to corroded capacity to arbitrary control, could contribute to a depletion of the care that justice systems can accommodate." In other words, these little bubbles of potentially positive human interaction are siloed, slowly losing the battle with the environment around them.

The Importance of Environments

Prison environments are conceptually complex (Galouzis, et al., 2023). But in many jurisdictions, they are noted to be unsafe for staff and prisoners, and harmful to health, social capital, and prospects, making them an obvious target for improvement. Puzzlingly, environment-level interventions aligned with the RNR model seem largely invisible in current government and academic literature. Approaches that would be RNR-compatible include having all staff adopt the Core Correctional Principles (CCPs) in interactions with prisoners, and contingency management regimes.

The CCPs derived from research by Andrews and Kiessling (1980) tested whether volunteer and staff probation officer behavior with supervisees predicted reduced recidivism. The effective dimensions, which can be learned and used by frontline staff are "effective use of authority, anticriminal modeling and reinforcement, problem solving, use of community resources, and quality of interpersonal relationships between staff and client" (Dowden & Andrews, 2004; p. 204), later also referred to as the relationship and structuring principles[1]. Their importance in reducing recidivism was confirmed by meta-analysis (Dowden & Andrews, 2004), and they are Principle 14 in *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct* (Bonta & Andrews, 2024). Yet, published evaluations of the effectiveness of CCP training with—or even the use of CCPs by—prison officers are hard to find (Haas & Spence, 2016).

Contingency management (CM) programs on the other hand are more common. They were the first behavior change programs to be set up in prisons, in the 1960s. They improved target behaviors (Gendreau et al., 2014) and were associated with reductions in recidivism (Gendreau & Ross, 1979). Contingency management, put simply, refers to influencing desired behavior by rewarding it (and much less often punishing undesirable behavior), and thus is widely used today in everything from parenting to corporate performance management. It is also seen in "incentive" or "privilege" schemes, in pockets of current prison systems. For example, a recent UK HM Chief Inspector's thematic review (Taylor, 2025) is replete with examples of incentive schemes and enriched environmental opportunities for prisoners to practice prosocial behavior, along with description of the systemic difficulties in doing so. This report does not link these efforts to the RNR model or to recidivism outcomes, but the approaches are compatible, since both are based on learning theory.

The most common type of change-supportive environmental regime in the current literature is probably a Therapeutic Community. The two main traditions—democratic and concept TCs—make use of practices derived from learning theory (e.g., earned privileges, modelling). Their philosophy is indirectly linked to learning, though it is not expressed in those terms, being broadly about resocializing people to be responsible, connected community members (De Leon, 2000; Richardson & Zini, 2021). TCs have been associated with reduced recidivism; though the "how" is not yet clear (Pearce & Pickard, 2013).

Alongside TCs and CM, are various other initiatives under the umbrella term of "better social climates." Liebling and colleagues' research is one example. Their theoretical model is intentionally not based on correctional psychology—here operationalized as an "exclusively 'interventions' or programs model" (Auty & Liebling, 2020; p. 364). Instead, they draw on three components of prison climate (moral agency, socialization and legitimacy) that together determine social order in a prison. Prisoners' perceptions of aspects of these components have been linked to recidivism outcomes (Auty & Liebling, 2020).

My early career was strongly influenced by experiences in community residential and prison-based treatment environments for men with high propensities for violence (e.g., Polaschek & Dixon, 2001; Polaschek & Kilgour, 2013). So, it has taken me longer than it should have to question how programs can contribute to effective behavior change when they are not supported by their environment. Supportive environments for rehabilitation are not the norm (Olver et al., 2020), and RNR rehabilitation and research on social climate have apparently developed without crossing paths (Harding, 2014). In

1 *In later editions of The Psychology of Criminal Conduct they are called the GPCSL-based staff practices.*

fact, although interventions based on environmental influences on behavior are part of the history of RNR, in recent years, the importance of the residential environment in RNR-aligned interventions seem largely to have disappeared. Meta-analyses note that community settings are more effective than residential ones without discussing whether the nature of the latter might explain why.

How did we practitioners and researchers who understand the psychology of behavior change condone the provision of these siloed little programs? Perhaps the simple answer is that we did not. We are without influence against the behemoth of custodial corrections, and the forces beyond it. At the start of my career, recidivism outcome evaluations were accumulating in volume, and I imagined the field moving from evaluating programs using recidivism outcome data—a poor proxy at best—to investigating *how* they worked. Instead, the field is still trying to prove to a hostile audience that these programs can contribute to reduced reoffending risk; to convince people whose fallback position is that if there is any doubt about effectiveness (e.g., Fazel, et al., 2023; Logan, et al.., 2025), prisons without rehabilitation are the better option.

It seems to me today that the field has missed the obvious when ruminating about the limitations of RNR. The RNR model is predicated on the assumption that prisoners who need risk-reducing rehabilitation gain from help to think and behave in ways that support a more prosocial lifestyle. Well-designed CBT gives visibility of the gap between how they have learned to navigate the world and what might be possible now that they are not children. It teaches them capabilities that they often do not have, and that are useful for all of us (e.g., emotional regulation, conflict resolution, problem solving). So, what they learn turns out to be helpful in the "real world" and not just for avoiding offending (Coupland & Olver, 2020). We have also found repeatedly that these programs significantly improve self-reported mental health as well (Kilgour & Polaschek, 2012). These interventions are worthwhile.

But new ways complement old habits; they don't obliterate them. New learning requires lots of practice in a supportive environment where the unfamiliar ways of thinking and behaving continue to be modelled and rewarded, consistent with the underlying theory; an RNR-based environment. Instead, people in prison are introduced to new ways in group and then return to social climates where the old habits still fit best. Graduates of siloed programs have told me that they plan to hold onto the knowledge provided and then implement it when they get out of prison. They explain that they can safely use only a few of the skills in their living environment without risking conflict with officers or prisoners, and for some skills, there is simply no suitable context for trying them out in their unit. Learning *about* skills only in group is a poor substitute for learning the skills, and while prisons are indeed artificial environments, they can provide genuine opportunities to work on reducing criminogenic needs far more than they currently do.

Delivery of CBGPs in an otherwise criminogenic environment is a poor investment. It is surprising if these circumstances are associated with reduced recidivism. In New Zealand prisons at present only those programs that are provided within a change-supportive environment are associated with meaningful reductions in recidivism (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2024).

Conclusions: How Can Prisons Get Better Results from the RNR model?

Just as in medicine, the first rule of prisons should be "first do no harm" no matter who is living in

them. Our prisons have needed reform for years. They are unsafe places to work and live, with high recidivism rates. As a recent Cultural Review puts it: "On the current track, prison growth will continue unsustainably. This is because custodial environments can be criminogenic – meaning people who have spent time in custody will be more likely to engage in further offending" (Victorian Government, 2022, p. 4). The true costs of prisons including impacts on staff, and the social, economic and health impacts of prisons are likely to be even higher. There is no doubt our societies cannot afford to continue on the current trajectory.

So where does RNR fit in? Not as the instrument that will reform prisons. The foundation of a prison should rest on the extent to which it is "safe, decent and fair" (Mann, et al. 2018, p. 4). The application of the RNR model sits over that foundation; it was not designed to be that foundation itself. Absent a consistent and rational societal and political vision of how modern prisons should run, all we can do is keep working on creating pockets of foundational rehabilitative culture: more humane social environments that give prisoners and staff somewhere better to work and live, and in turn can better motivate people to take part in rehabilitation, support risk-reducing rehabilitation, and help people consolidate gains after active periods of new learning.

Initiatives to create rehabilitative prisons may go part of the way to providing environments where investment in RNR yields better results. There doesn't yet appear to be consensus about what these might look like, nor even whether RNR has a place in them (Jewkes & Gooch, 2019). But to get the best out of the application of the RNR model to reducing recidivism, prison systems need to pay more than lip service to the environments in which prisoners live, including prisoners on remand. A rehabilitative prison culture is a necessary (but not sufficient) first step (Mann et al., 2018; see also Mann, 2019).

The parts of the RNR model that are about conditions supporting behavior change rest on robustly established psychological principles, and when enacted well may provide a relatively efficient way to reduce the drivers of reoffending. But there is nothing about the RNR model itself that stops us from experimenting with *how* effective interventions are designed and provided. In a supportive environment there must surely be room for innovations that make the essential ingredients accessible to more prisoners more efficiently.

Custodial frontline staff are central both to a rehabilitative culture in general, and to increasing impact of RNR-based interventions, whether it be through training in CCPs, or 5-minute interventions (Vickers-Pinchbeck, 2019), or any other approach that helps staff to motivate and support prisoners where they can in their daily interactions (Small & Hackett, 2023). Staff in these roles need training and high-quality practice supervision, something that appears to be completely unknown for corrections officers (Forsyth et al., 2022). This is not to suggest the correctional officers are therapists. Rather, it is to equip them to use the skills of a good parent—given that arguably they already act 'in loco parentis' (Arnold, 2016)—to support them to negotiate the complexities of their roles.

It will be very difficult to develop positive social climates in some units or prisons, and some prisoners may not (initially) want to live in them. Creating a "gradient" within a prison, where some units are overtly safer, or more rehabilitative in focus than others, gives prisoners (and staff) some hope of working toward transfer into those environments. Consistent with the risk principle, significantly

more resources are likely to be needed for units where prisoners tend toward higher risk behavior. In New Zealand, sentenced prisoners in high medium security units have very little access to a positive social climate or risk reducing interventions. It is not clear how such units should be designed and resourced to achieve better outcomes.

There are several other approaches or philosophies proposed as alternatives to the RNR model's underlying theory of what maintains or ameliorates criminal risk, including "trauma-informed care" (McLachlan, 2024), "humanizing and healing" (NZ Government, 2019), and "normalization" (Jewkes & Gooch, 2019). These philosophies are arguably better thought of as reactions to current prison regimes, at the foundational level of the Mann et al. (2018) model. None has yet been established as effective in keeping people out of prison on its own. None is likely to have more than a trivial impact on current prison systems any more than has the RNR model, because the challenge is not in identifying that prisons should be more humane, it is in progressing them in that direction. And although out of scope, reintegration preparation and post-release supervision are also very important to success.

Triaging prisoners with Risk and Needs assessments and then providing a suite of siloed cognitive-behavioral programs for a few of them has not proved to be the panacea our prisons need. Claiming to be aligned with the RNR model serves to create the illusion for politicians, government and society that prisons are doing what they can to rehabilitate, when in reality they are punishing places garnished with isolated bubbles of ad hoc positive activity. At the same time, an active RNR-based intervention that does extend into the living environment of the attendees is an implausible operationalization of the model's effective intervention principles. So instead of expecting the RNR model to fix prisons as well as prisoners, let's move into an era where it is implemented with a host that isn't mostly working against it, and then see how it works. We would then be able to investigate important theoretical questions, such as whether the RNR model has additive effects on outcomes in a positive prison environment or whether there is more than one plausible theoretical way to help prisoners to reduce their risk of future offending.

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