

Qualitative Examination of Specific Responsivity Factors of Correctional Program Participants with Mental Health Symptoms, Cognitive Impairment, or Learning Disabilities

Correctional Program Officers are aware of the responsivity factors of offenders and make a concerted effort to provide accommodations, tools, and support to address these concerns.

Why we did this study

A recent evaluation of the Correctional Service of Canada's correctional reintegration programs found offenders with mental health, intellectual deficit, learning disability, anxiety/hesitation (men only), or brain injury responsivity factors reported the lowest rates of receiving accommodations to help them participate in correctional programs. This study aims to identify how Correctional Program Officers and Indigenous Correctional Program Officers (CPOs and ICPOs) address the various specific responsivity factors that may interfere with offenders' participation in correctional programs.

What we did

This study involved a thematic review of casefiles from the Offender Management System, an administrative database containing offender records. The study sample included 77 offenders admitted to federal custody between July 1, 2017 and March 31, 2020 who participated in a moderate intensity correctional program. To identify individuals with responsivity needs that would affect program participation, they had to have an indication of a responsivity need as determined by casefile coders, and must have met at least one of the following: (a) an active learning disability need; (b) an active cognitive impairment need; or (c) 'considerable need or higher' rating on the Mental Health Needs Scale.

What we found

The findings showed that CPOs and ICPOs recorded responsivity needs in the 'Attendance and Participation' section of the final program report for 100% of cases reviewed for the adapted programs and for the majority (65.5%) of cases reviewed for the non-adapted programs, although coders identified a responsivity factor elsewhere in the offender's program reports for the remaining 34.5%.

Participants often had multiple responsivity factors, which CPOs and ICPOs observed as interfering with their program participation. Responsivity factors were most commonly observed to interfere with participants' abilities to understand, learn, or apply program content. These factors were also more frequently recorded among

adapted program participants than non-adapted participants.

In the majority of cases, CPOs and ICPOs provided various accommodations, tools, and support to address responsivity needs, although adaptations were more common in the adapted program streams. CPOs and ICPOs commonly simplified program concepts and materials, prompted participants to use program skills, and worked one-on-one with the participant to review material or complete work. Notably, there were also many instances of the participants taking the initiative to address their responsivity factors by asking for extra support and assistance.

While not consistently recorded, CPOs and ICPOs deemed the program adaptations to be effective in addressing responsivity factors of offenders in the majority of cases where this information was documented.

What it means

The results of this study provide evidence that CPOs and ICPOs are aware of participants' specific responsivity factors, and that they make a concerted effort to address these factors using a variety of accommodations, tools, and support. However, responsivity factors were not consistently recorded in administrative files for non-adapted programs. More support may be required to ensure these needs are adequately identified, addressed, and reported.

For more information

Sheahan, C., Tanga, M., Wardrop, K., & Bah, R. (2023). *Qualitative examination of specific responsivity factors of correctional program participants with mental health symptoms, cognitive impairment, or learning disabilities*. (Research Report R-441). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

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