



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Applying the risk-need-responsivity model in juvenile offender treatment: A conceptual framework

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Abstract

Juvenile crime in India is a pressing issue that requires tailored rehabilitation approaches. This paper explores the application of the "Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model" as a conceptual model for treating juvenile offenders within the Indian legal context. The study reviews correctional practices and highlights the need for structured offender treatment based on the 'RNR model's' core principles of 'risk,' 'need,' and 'responsivity.' Drawing on criminological theories and empirical evidence, the paper emphasizes the significance of addressing criminogenic factors to reduce recidivism. By analyzing existing literature on juvenile justice, the paper demonstrates how the RNR model, typically employed in Western contexts, can be adapted for India's socio-cultural environment to enhance the effectiveness of juvenile rehabilitation. The findings suggest that integrating RNR-informed interventions into the juvenile justice system can improve long-term rehabilitation outcomes and reduce re-offense rates among young offenders.

Keywords: Juvenile delinquency, Offender treatment, The RNR model, Juvenile justice system.

Introduction

Crime can be defined as deviant behavior that is punishable under the law and an action that may be rewarding to the actor, but that inflicts pain or loss on others. Crime is something that both intrigues and scares people. It reflects the functioning of society and affects the same, more so when children are involved in acts of crime as offenders. They are usually referred to as juvenile delinquents. "A juvenile is an individual who has not completed eighteen years of age." Juvenile Offenders in India are under the purview of the Legal Justice system as per "The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 (Act 2 of 2016)", and "The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection

of Children) Amendment Act, 2021 (Act 23 of 2021)" (JJ Act). In India, Juvenile offenders are addressed as "children in conflict with law" (CCL), which refers to a "child who is alleged or found to have committed an offense and who has not completed 18 years of age on the date of commission of such offense." Offense refers to an 'offense or act punishable under the law for the time being in force.' The nature of these offenses is classified as petty, serious, and heinous. As per 'Crime in India: Statistics Vol 1' published by the NCRB or "National Crime Record Bureau" (2023), the crime rate prevalence (for heinous offenses) of Juvenile crimes is 6.9%, and across India, more than 75% of juveniles apprehended are held guilty. Age & gender-wise, most offenses are committed by boys aged 16 to 18 years, and offense-wise, they commit heinous offenses classified in the Bhartiya Nyaya Samhita as 'offenses against human body' and 'offenses against property.' These include crimes like murder, attempt to murder, rape, theft, robbery, burglary, etc. A country is said to march on the feet of its youth. Today's youngsters are tomorrow's adults and future workforce and pillars of society. The prevalence of criminal behavior and the nature of offenses committed among children necessitates effective intervention strategies that address the unique needs of young offenders (Bhargav, 2024). Once a child is apprehended for an offense committed, the approach of 'offender treatment' can help provide an effective and

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How to cite this article: Lad, B.B., Mansukhani, S. (2024). Applying the risk-need-responsivity model in juvenile offender treatment: A conceptual framework. *The Scientific Temper*, 15(spl-2):18-23.

Doi: 10.58414/SCIENTIFICTEMPER.2024.15.spl-2.04

Source of support: Nil

Conflict of interest: None.

sustainable solution to combat this social evil. The current paper explores the correctional system or approaches to rehabilitate and reform adults and juveniles in India and discusses the need for offender treatment. This paper briefly describes two prominent models or frameworks of offender treatment and elaborates on the conceptual backdrop of the "RNR model." Moreover, this study reconnoiters the relevance and application of the RNR model to juvenile offender treatment in India. By analyzing existing literature and theoretical perspectives, this paper aims to highlight the potential benefits and restrictions of implementing the RNR model within the Indian juvenile justice framework.

Methodology

This conceptual paper, with an exploratory approach, analyzed the existing literature on prison correctional services, offender treatment, and the RNR model, referring to books and book chapters in criminology and forensic psychology along with published research papers and relevant legal documents. This study focuses on a comprehensive review of existing literature to explore and assess the application of correctional frameworks, particularly the "Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model," in "juvenile offender treatment."

Prison Correctional Practices in India

The modern correctional approach considers that lawbreakers are sentenced to jail imprisonment as punishment and not for punishment (Das, 2021). Prison Welfare Service aims to reform the prisoners inside the jail to dissuade them from the path of crime and delinquency and thus reform or rehabilitate them. Prison correctional services take measures to achieve these goals by promoting activities within offenders. Various state prison correctional services have some customized individual training programs as well. Prisons usually provide educational programs, vocational training, spiritual programs, and recreational activities, to name a few initiatives. Majorly, services available to offenders in prisons can be classified as educational programs, vocational programs to help them earn financial independence, and recreational activities (Best Prison Practice-regarding, 2010). Below are the services available to them:

- Counseling services – counseling services are provided to all inmates,
- Education - Literacy programs are conducted with the help of NOS and IGNOU. Some of the prisons also have tie-ups with State Universities and technology centers to provide specific skill-based courses or computer skills etc.,
- Vocational Training - Vocational training is provided to help them learn skills and enable some earning opportunities. Training is provided for areas like bookbinding, carpentry, smithy, tailoring, phenyl

making, etc. One of the projects undertaken in Tihar Jail is SRIJAN, wherein articles like paper bags, dairies, etc, made by prison inmates are sold across Sri Ravi Shankar's Art of Living Centres. (Dubey, & Agarwal, 2021)

- Yoga and Meditation - Regular exercises along with Asanas, Pranayam, Dhyan, Upasana, Vipassana, Yoga, and Meditation are undertaken by various NGOs within Prisons,
- Observation of religious Festivals,
- Various Spiritual and cultural programs are held,
- Celebration of National Festivals.

Similarly, under the purview of "the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act," for any child apprehended and involved in a criminal act, the treatment offered is different compared to adult offenders. As far as Juveniles are concerned, In India, incarceration is the last possible punishment applied to them. It is usually considered only for children aged 16 to 18 years when proven guilty of heinous offenses. A "child in conflict with Law" (CCL) is understood in terms of 'child in need of protection' and/or 'child in need of rehabilitation.' Thus, accordingly, the Juvenile Justice Board draws an Individual care plan. It is then decided to release the child back home or send to a child care institution (CCI) like an 'observation home,' 'special home,' or 'fit facility.' Usually, for petty and serious offenses committed, punishment is in the form of a fine, community service, counseling, etc, as the Juvenile Justice Board deems fit. For CCL involved in Heinous offences, on a case-to-case basis psychological assessment of personality and cognitive functioning is undertaken too. Above mentioned Prison services provided to adults are available to children as well.

Offender Treatment

Offender treatment in correctional services refers to the program that aims to reduce reoffending or recidivism by addressing the root causes of criminal behavior. It includes systematically assessing and collecting clinically relevant information about the offender's offending behavior, functional life domains, personal characteristics, and socioeconomic and family history. This is systematically organized in the RNR model. Once the nature of the offender problem is well-defined and identified, in the manner of case formulation, an intervention plan should be developed and executed (Durrant & Ward, 2015).

The systematic review by Mark Lipsey and Francis Cullen (2007) explored the impact of "correctional interventions" on reoffending or recidivism rates and highlighted the effects of rehabilitation over punitive measures. The findings revealed that while supervision and sanctions may lead to modest reductions in the rate of reoffending, rehabilitation treatments generally showed more promising results in reducing recidivism. The main findings regarding the effectiveness of rehabilitation treatments compared to punitive approaches are highlighted below:-

Positive impact & greater effectiveness: Rehabilitation treatments significantly reduce recidivism rates, with offenders receiving such treatments showing lower rates than those who do not.

Variability in effectiveness: Rehabilitation effectiveness varies based on treatment type, implementation quality, and offender characteristics, with well-developed treatments showing larger effects.

Research consistency: Systematic reviews consistently indicate that rehabilitation treatments are more effective in reducing re-offense rates than punitive sanctions.

Overall, the evidence strongly supports that the rehabilitative approach is more effective than the punitive approach in reducing recidivism and enhancing public safety (Lipsey & Cullen, 2007)

"The risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model" and "the Good Lives Model" (GLM) are the two widely established and useful frameworks in the area of offender treatment and rehabilitation models.

The Good Lives Model (GLM)

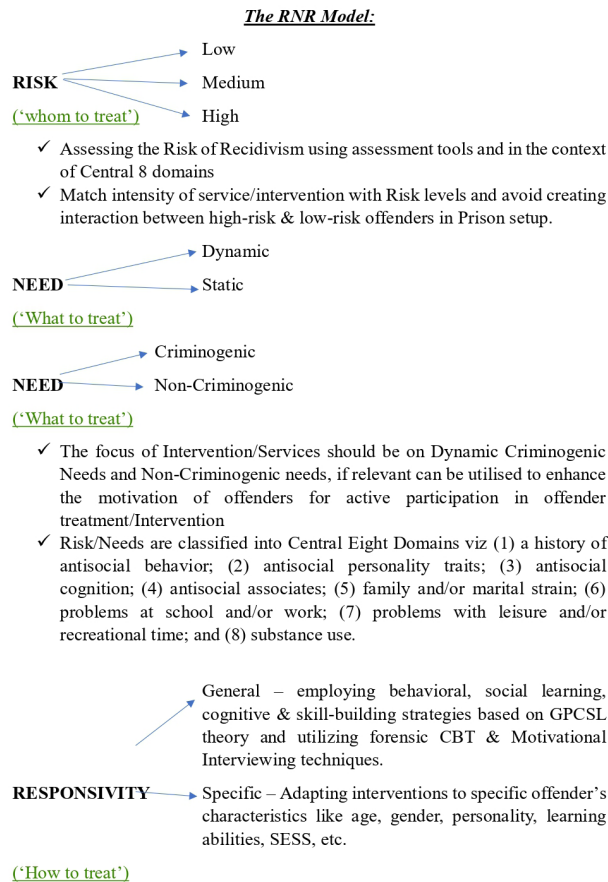
Tony Ward and colleagues developed the Good Lives Model or GLM primarily as a theoretical model of Sex offenders' treatment. GLM is now used as a model of correctional treatment for other types of offenders, too. The core assumption of GLM states that all humans have analogous aspirations and needs in life and that everyone sets and selects goals, creates plans, and behaves sentimentally to accomplish them. The GLM is a strengths-based rehabilitation model that seeks to provide clients with the tools they need to live better, more socially acceptable, and personally fulfilling lives. The GLM suggests that people with a history of crime are goal-oriented and inclined to pursue various "primary human goods." As per the GLM model, "primary goods refer to certain states of mind, personal characteristics, and experiences that represent a person's core values and life priorities" (Willis & Ward, 2013). There are eleven classes of primary goods which are - "(1) life (including healthy living and functioning); (2) knowledge; (3) excellence in play; (4) excellence in work (including mastery experiences); (5) excellence in agency (i.e., autonomy and self-directedness); (6) inner peace (i.e., freedom from emotional turmoil and stress); (7) friendship (including intimate, romantic, and family relationships); (8) community; (9) spirituality (in the broad sense of finding meaning and purpose in life); (10) happiness; and, (11) creativity" (Willis, & Ward, 2013). Criminality is viewed as a failure to pursue meaningful life goals using prosocial methods or as a maladaptive technique for upholding one's beliefs. 'Criminogenic needs' or 'dynamic risk factors,' which are part of the RNR model, are viewed as "internal" or "external" obstacles to leading a fulfilling life. Thus, treatment programs should help criminals reach personally meaningful objectives or acquire the necessary knowledge,

abilities, and chances they need to live up to their values without engaging in criminal activity (Willis & Ward, 2013).

The Risk-Need-Responsivity Model

The RNR model has emerged as a prominent framework in the field of criminal justice and correctional psychology, particularly for its application in rehabilitating adult offenders. The RNR framework provides practitioners with a structured approach to designing and implementing evidence-based interventions that reduce recidivism and promote positive youth development (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Developed by Andrews and Bonta (1990), this model has gained recognition for its empirically significant, evidence-based approach to rehabilitating offenders, primarily within Western contexts. It was first formalized in 1990 and has been expanded upon and drawn within a "General Personality and Cognitive Social Learning Theory (GPCSL)" of criminal demeanor (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). A GPCSL perspective integrates social learning, cognitive behavioral, and social cognition theories and is more valuable in explaining and analyzing criminal behavior. This theory posits that personality traits and cognitive processes play significant roles in shaping behavior, particularly in the context of social learning. The RNR model is founded on three core principles: "risk, need, and responsivity." The risk principle emphasizes the importance of harmonizing the intensity of interventions to the offender's risk level, the need principle focuses on addressing specific 'dynamic criminogenic needs,' i.e., needs that are directly related to the manifestation of criminal behavior, and the responsivity principle advocates for tailoring interventions to the offender's characteristics, motivational levels and learning styles. These three principles of the RNR model can be simply understood as answering to "whom to treat", "what to treat", and "how to treat". Thus, it lays the foundation for a precise, structured as well as flexible, and offender-centric approach to rehabilitation, leading to higher chances of preventing reoffending. "The RNR Model" advocates the assessment of "Central Eight Risk/Need domains" viz, "(1) a history of antisocial behavior; (2) antisocial personality traits; (3) antisocial cognition; (4) antisocial associates; (5) family and/or marital strain; (6) problems at school and/or work; (7) problems with leisure and/or recreational time; and (8) substance use." Focus while designing effective intervention plans is more on dynamic and criminogenic risk/needs, non-criminogenic needs can be utilized for motivating offenders or removing distractions and facilitating involved participation in treatment programs (Andrews & Bonta, 2010).

Within the RNR model, cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) is often utilized for high-risk offenders, as it can effectively target behaviors that contribute to recidivism. By focusing on cognitive distortions and maladaptive behaviors, CBT helps reduce the likelihood of reoffending. CBT directly



Source: Andrews and Bonta, the *Psychology of Criminal Conduct*, 5th Edition

Figure 1: Summary of three Principles of the RNR model

addresses deviant or distorted thought patterns behind criminogenic needs by identifying and modifying specific risk factors related to criminal behavior, such as “substance use or abuse,” “antisocial attitudes,” and “poor problem-solving skills”. The RNR model’s emphasis on addressing the needs that drive criminal behavior. Empirical research evidence supports the effectiveness of CBT within the RNR framework. Studies indicate that CBT can reduce recidivism rates significantly, with some studies suggesting reductions of up to 29% compared to non-treated groups. This empirical backing reinforces the model’s effectiveness in real-world applications. (Karabatak, 2023; Mitchell *et al.*, 2018; Andrews & Bonta, 2010). The Figure 1 summarises the three basic and important RNR principles as discussed in “The Psychology of Criminal Conduct” book.

RNR model has several strengths and weaknesses that impact its application in criminal rehabilitation.

Some of the Strengths of RNR model include -

Structured and comprehensive framework

The RNR model offers a structured and systematic method for offender’s assessment and treatment. Being based on “a general personality and cognitive social learning

theory (GPCSL),” it encompasses Nature and Nurture components while assessing and designing an intervention. It understands offenders in terms of personal, interpersonal, and community reinforcement perspectives, thus providing a more detailed grasp of the complexities of criminalistic tendencies and facilitating designing a specific intervention plan. These components are part of the central eight risk/need domains. (Andrews & Bonta, 2010).

Empirical support

As described in the *Psychology of Criminal Conduct*, numerous meta-analytic studies validate the effectiveness of “the RNR model” in reducing recidivism rates (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). The model’s principles reveal that targeting “risk factors” and “criminogenic needs” can significantly improve rehabilitation outcomes. The principles of “the RNR model” are based on robust psychological theories that enhance its credibility and applicability across various types of offenders and offenses (Polaschek, 2012). Empirical studies demonstrated that offender treatment following the RNR concepts was able to diminish violent recidivism, sexual recidivism, and general recidivism (Lutz *et al.*, 2022).

Tailored offender-centric interventions

The model accentuates the importance of matching interventions to the criminal’s risk level, needs, and individual characteristics. This personalized approach enhances engagement and effectiveness, as treatment can be adapted to suit individual differences among offenders. “The RNR model” has been successfully implemented in various correctional settings, leading to the development of evidence-based programs that effectively address the needs of offenders (Blanchette & Brown, 2006).

Focus on dynamic criminogenic needs

The RNR model aims to address the root causes of offending by concentrating on dynamic criminogenic needs—factors that contribute directly to criminal behavior. This focus helps develop targeted interventions that are more likely to succeed in promoting resistance to crime (Blanchette & Brown, 2006).

Integration of strengths

The RNR model, using techniques from forensic CBT and Motivational Interviewing, acknowledges the importance of individual strengths that can be leveraged in the rehabilitation process. This strengths-based perspective facilitates positive change and enhances motivation to actively participate in treatment programs.

Some of the Limitations of RNR model include

Complexity of human behavior

The model’s reliance on risk assessments and criminogenic needs may oversimplify human behavior complexities and may not fully capture the multifaceted nature of offenders’

lives, including socioeconomic, cultural, and psychological factors that influence behavior (Willis, & Ward, 2013).

Neglect of non-criminogenic needs

The model effectively focuses on criminogenic needs but has been criticized for possibly overlooking non-criminogenic needs that may be crucial for overall well-being. This oversight may restrict the holistic effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts, as personal distress and other emotional needs may also significantly impact an offender's rehabilitation journey (Willis, & Ward, 2013).

Practical application and need for professional training

The researcher feels there is some ambiguity regarding the interpretation and implementation of "the RNR model." "The RNR model" faces challenges in interpretation and implementation, leading to inconsistencies in its application across different contexts. Its complexity may hinder practical application, as practitioners without specialized training may struggle to understand its detailed principles. The model's inclusion of professional judgment introduces variability in treatment quality and outcomes depending on the practitioner's experience, expertise, and biases (Polaschek, 2012).

Cultural considerations

The RNR model may not fully account for cultural differences among offenders. The effectiveness of its principles may vary across diverse populations, and there is a need for adaptations that consider cultural contexts and values in rehabilitation practices.

To summarize, even though the RNR model offers a strong framework for offender rehabilitation, it requires continuous evaluation and adaptation to enhance its applicability and effectiveness in diverse circumstances.

Lutz *et al.*, (2022) reviewed "the RNR Model" and "GLM" along with "the recovery model" in forensic psychiatric treatment of mentally disordered offenders (MDO). Both the RNR and the GLM vary in their approach to promoting personal development to facilitate offender treatment. The RNR model focuses on reducing criminal risks and deficits, while the GLM aims to improve individuals' resources for a good life. GLM focuses more on increasing the personal well-being of the offender, but unless the criminogenic needs of moderate and high-risk cases offenders are worked upon or reduced, the probability of reoffending cannot be reduced. The RNR model addresses this concern along with working on enhancing the personal well-being of the offender (Andrews & Bonta, 2010).

Conclusion

Although the RNR model and its principles have been extensively validated in Western contexts, their application in "India's juvenile justice system" remains unexplored. India's juvenile justice system operates within a framework

shaped by diverse socioeconomic conditions, cultural norms, and regional disparities. Juvenile Justice in India, endorsing "the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)", takes a holistic approach with emphasis on child-centric special needs their vulnerabilities and focus on children's rehabilitation and ultimate re-integration in society. The RNR model enables in achievement of these goals of "the Juvenile Justice System" with more efficacy in changing what can be changed and enhancing self-reliance in children to be more functional adults and leave behind the life of crime. Breaking the mold of the 'One-Fit-for-all' approach, the RNR model framework fits aptly in providing an effective and structured strategy considering the cultural and socioeconomic contexts that shape children's experiences and behaviors. Just as we consider a "child in conflict with law" (CCL) in terms of the felony committed like petty/serious/heinous, similarly, while drawing an Individual care plan for a CCL, or deciding its case judgment or ruling, employing assessment and understanding the child in CCL in terms of reoffending risk, and in terms of central 8 risk/need domains and then making a judgment, the intervention plan may prove to be a more effective strategy in the rehabilitating child. This study concludes with a suggestion that along with providing education, vocational courses, or penalization in the form of "community service," mandating the CCL to undergo a structured therapeutic intervention based on the RNR model as discussed earlier in the paper, encompassing assessment and intervention based on child-specific risk/need domains will help provide a more effective and sustainable remedy to reform/rehabilitate child and decrease the probability of reoffending.

Acknowledgment

The researcher would like to acknowledge the authors and researchers whose work was drawn upon in this paper. The researcher extends heartfelt gratitude to the academic supervisor and co-author of this paper, Dr. Sonam Mansukhani, for her guidance and insightful feedback.

Conflict of Interest

Both authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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