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Correctional Service
Canada

Service correctionnel
Canada

RESEARCH REPORT

COMMUNICATIONS AND CORPORATE DEVELOPMENT

Research Report

**Focusing on Successful Reintegration:
Cognitive Skills Training for Offenders**

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=====**Research Report**=====

**Focusing on Successful Reintegration:
Cognitive Skills Training for Offenders**

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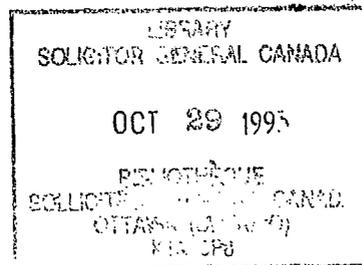
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Focusing on Successful Reintegration:
Cognitive Skills Training for Offenders

Research Report N° 19



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We wish to extend sincere appreciation to our Commissioner of Corrections Ole Ingstrup, for his unfaltering vision of what corrections can be and for creating the climate of support for development of effective correctional programming. Also, we wish to thank our regional and front-line staff - and particularly our program coaches - without whose commitment and effort little could be achieved.

INTRODUCTION

From an international optic, North American corrections is perhaps viewed predominantly as a corrections of record-breaking incarceration rates; large, overcrowded and violent prisons managed under traditional regimes of "static" security, controlled and regimented within the ever-pervasive presence of the latest high-tech hardware; modular prison construction to keep pace with the constant flow of incoming offenders sentenced to longer prison terms for a growing variety of violent and drug-related offenses; and in its approach to the development of correctional programming, a corrections singularly preoccupied with the "bullet" solution, the latest "faddish" approach, the "boot camp", "shock incarceration" or "electronic monitoring" type of intervention, cloaked as effective programming but with little or no underlying theoretical or empirical support.

With few exceptions, this is the corrections which prevails throughout the United States of America; but Canada stands in significant contrast. Even the language of our corrections stands in contrast. While the U.S. seeks "punishment options" or ways of making imprisonment more "intensive" (Editorial, Association of State Correctional Administrators, vol. 6, # 6, 1990), in Canada we seek ways of "targeting" our programming efforts, ways of identifying offender needs, and ways of enhancing continuity of our programs and services for offenders under community supervision.

A striking example of differences in orientation is to compare Canada with the U.S. State of California. The two have a general population base of approximately similar size; about 26 and 28 million respectively. In California, however, there are about 154,000 offenders incarcerated in State prisons or local jails (Blue Ribbon Commission on Inmate Population Management, State of California, January, 1990). This compares with not quite 30,000 in our Federal and provincial facilities in Canada. Even with a massive effort of over 3 billion dollars of prison construction, the State of California forecasts it will barely achieve a target of 130 percent capacity by 1994; most of its facilities will remain terribly overcrowded.

Within the Correctional Service of Canada, crowding is not a significant issue, and we have no major construction plans other than to modernize some of our facilities. Despite a moderate increase in our total offender population averaging 2.4% each year since 1987-88, this past year we have been successful in reducing the size of our incarcerated population by .4 % and increasing the size of our supervision population by 5%.

Our preoccupation within the Correctional Service of Canada is with reintegration ... we believe, and we have been acting concretely and purposefully from our belief, that a meaningful and mission-oriented corrections must be cost-effective, and thereby reduce, as much as possible, its reliance on incarceration.

The Correctional Service of Canada has just emerged from a major process of examining and defining its purpose. We have articulated a Mission, which outlines the directions we

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wish to move in and the accomplishments, or failures, for which we wish to be held accountable. Our Mission encompasses a set of five enduring core values, key guiding principles or assumptions that should underlay all of our policies and practice, and 56 distinct strategic objectives. It defines, for our government, for our staff and inmates, and for the public at large, what, in our professional view, will be good corrections in Canada for years to come.

Our Mission has brought us quite logically to setting clear operational goals for reintegrating significantly larger numbers of offenders at an earlier point in their sentence. We believe we can do this, quite simply, with effective case management practices and responsive programming that targets important criminogenic needs (Andrews, 1989).

Principal among the strategies we have pursued in the area of programming is an innovative new approach, our core Cognitive Skills Program, founded on some of the most recent theory and research into the roots of criminal behaviour.

This brief paper summarizes the underlying principles of the cognitive approach, outlines our strategy for ensuring careful and systematic implementation, and gives some preliminary research data on the effectiveness of the Cognitive Skills Training Program in relation to:

- o selection of appropriate offenders for participation in intensive rehabilitative programming - identification of high risk offenders
- o effects on attitudes, behaviour and cognitive skills - positive effects on targeted dimensions, and
- o post-release outcomes of offenders - reduction of recidivism

More complete descriptions are available of the development and implementation strategies (Fabiano, Robinson, and Porporino, 1990), and of the research data on effectiveness gathered to date (Robinson, Grossman, and Porporino, 1991).

DEVELOPMENT OF THE COGNITIVE SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAM

A fundamental difference between "effective" and "ineffective" correctional programs is the conceptualization of criminal behaviour on which the programs are based. The conceptualization of criminal behaviour should determine the goals of the intervention and the intermediate targets on which the program should focus. The model also should serve as a guide for program development by outlining the techniques that should be employed to reach objectives.

Though many correctional programs in the past have been based on inadequate conceptual models, most have been based on no model at all. As a result, correctional interventions have functioned in a conceptual vacuum. Despite the fact that there are many conceptualizations of the causes of criminal behaviour, only a few are supported by adequate empirical evidence and suggest intervention strategies which are feasible, practical, and effective.

The Cognitive Skills Training program is based on the Cognitive Social Competence model of criminal behaviour which derives from cognitive social-learning theory and research. Its principal aim is to train offenders in those skills, and to impart those values and attitudes, which research has indicated are required for pro-social adaptation (Ross & Fabiano, 1985; Zamble & Porporino, 1988).

The major premise of the cognitive model is that what and how an offender thinks, how he views the world, how well he understands people, what he values, how he reasons, and how he attempts to solve problems plays an important role in his criminal behaviour.

Specifically, it has been found that many offenders lack self-control. They are action-oriented, impulsive and unable to consider the consequences of their actions. Advice, warnings or punishment often seem to have little impact on them because they fail to reflect back on their behaviour and its effects. Many offenders have never acquired critical reasoning skills, and they show a host of thinking errors. The most common of these is externalizing the blame for their actions onto other people or circumstances "beyond their control". Although they often are able to rationalize their anti-social behaviour and justify their actions, the reasoning they use in doing so is frequently simplistic and illogical. Their thinking is often exceptionally shallow and narrow - they construe their world in absolute terms, failing to appreciate the subtleties and complexities of social interactions, and they tend to adopt simple solutions to complex problems. They fail to think through problem situations and tend to uncritically accept those conclusions which immediately occur to them or are presented by authoritative sources. They then cling to these conclusions stubbornly and rigidly. Consequently, their thinking is often inflexible, uncreative, and maladaptive. Moreover, many offenders fail to consider that their thinking, their behaviour and their attitudes contribute to the problems they experience.

Evidence also indicates that many offenders have not progressed beyond an egocentric stage of cognitive development: they are unable (or fail) to distinguish between their own emotional states and thoughts and views and those of other people. Lacking this ability, they misread social expectations and misinterpret the actions and intentions of others. They also lack the ability to form acceptable relationships with people (including employers and spouses). This prevents them from developing appropriate means of dealing with interpersonal problems.

The basic assumption of the cognitive model is that the offender's thinking should be a primary target for offender rehabilitation. Cognitive skills, acquired either through life experience or through intervention, may serve to help the individual relate to his environment in a more socially adaptive fashion and reduce the chances of adopting a pattern of criminal conduct.

Such a conceptualization of criminal behaviour has important implications for correctional programming. It suggests that offenders who are poorly equipped cognitively to cope successfully must be taught rather than treated. It suggests that emphasis be placed on teaching offenders social competence by focusing on:

- o thinking skills, problem-solving and decision-making;
- o general strategies for recognizing problems, analyzing them, conceiving and considering alternative non-criminal solutions to them;
- o ways of thinking logically, objectively, and rationally without overgeneralizing, distorting facts, or externalizing blame;
- o calculating the consequences of their behaviour - to stop and think before they act;
- o going beyond an egocentric view of the world so as to comprehend and consider the thoughts and feelings of other people;
- o improving interpersonal problem-solving skills and developing coping behaviours which can serve as effective alternatives to anti-social or criminal behaviour;
- o viewing frustrations as problem-solving tasks and not just as personal threats;
- o developing a self-regulatory system so that their pro-social behaviour is not dependant on external control;
- o developing beliefs that they can control their life; that what happens to them depends in large measure on their thinking and the behaviour it leads to.

ATTENTION TO PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION AND DELIVERY

Correctional programs can easily fail in the process of implementation. There are legions of examples of programs that have been properly conceptualized but poorly implemented. They have failed to adhere to the key principles of effective correctional treatment. For these reasons, we paid particular attention to the process of implementation.

The following details of implementation are noteworthy for two reasons: first, as examples of a purposeful strategy developed to ensure the integrity of program delivery, and second, as an approach that would facilitate program endurance by fostering front-line staff acceptance and support.

- o Extensive consultation was conducted with line managers and staff in order to explain the approach, outline plans, and ensure their support for the program.
- o Individuals selected as the initial program "deliverers" were employees who volunteered for the assignment. They were chosen not on the basis of their professional qualifications or programming background, but as individuals who had the required interpersonal skills, values, commitments, and influence style to effectively model "social competence".
- o These coaches were trained in an intensive and structured ten-day workshop that gave them considerable opportunity to practice program delivery.
- o Quality control procedures were followed from the onset to ensure program integrity. Specifically, throughout program delivery, all coaches were periodically monitored via video-tape, and bi-weekly conference calls were coordinated to discuss sessions and ensure that the service provided continued to conform to program principles. A consultation hot-line was also established with the national trainer, so as to immediately resolve any difficulties or concerns with particular program components. This kind of monitoring is an element often lacking in the introduction of correctional programming, but it essential to ensuring that program implementation has actually occurred.
- o Prior to start-up, all staff within the institution or facility where the program was being introduced received at least a half-day of awareness training. The objective was to provide all staff, even though they were not directly involved in the program, with sufficient awareness and understanding of the

goals of the program to create a more broadly based environment of support, reinforcement, and consistent supervision which could assist offenders in maintaining "new skills" developed in the program.

The program, which is comprehensive and includes a selection of the best techniques from a large number of techniques used in a review of effective "cognitive -based" programs (cf. Ross & Fabiano, 1985) operates for approximately 8 to 12 weeks, depending on the number of sessions run in a week, and is provided to small groups of six to eight participants in a classroom setting.

Based on the fact that the level of involvement and participation of offenders is dependant to a large extent on how well their motivation can be sustained, the program deliberately combines the use of cognitive techniques with other techniques and teaching materials found to be successful with offenders: audio-visual presentations, games, puzzles, reasoning exercises, role-playing and modelling techniques and group discussion strategies . Furthermore, as the training requires concentrated attention and focus, program sessions are never extended beyond two hours.

A critical aspect of program delivery is the sequencing and timing of each session, which ensures skill acquisition. The teaching and presentation of various skills is ordered in such a way that new skills are introduced only after other prerequisite skills have been taught and practised and, where required, skills are repeated and taught in a different manner so as to ensure the generalizability of the skills. Reality, or how skills can and will be used by offenders also affects what and how different skills are taught.

RESEARCH ON EFFECTIVENESS

In view of our adherence to the risk principle of offender classification, which suggests that intensive programming is most effective among offenders who are at higher risk for recidivism (Andrews, 1989), the appropriate selection of participants for Cognitive Skills Programming was regarded as a critical objective. Selection procedures, therefore, were designed to target the program for high risk offenders.

Targeting Higher Risk Offenders for Participation

Institutional Case Management staff, in sites where the program was being offered, were provided a structured Criteria Checklist to screen all offenders who were 1 to 2 years away from some form of conditional release. The checklist allowed for evaluation of basic cognitive abilities and identified "high need" offenders. Our analysis with a sample of 281 referrals that we have studied to date suggests that we are indeed targeting a higher risk

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group. For example, the majority (70%) had failed on previous community supervision, only 13% had no history of alcohol or drug problems, most had poor ratings on pre-arrest "street stability", and most had offenses that were classified as "serious" or "major".

Moreover, on an index of risk for reoffending (the Statistical Information on Recidivism (SIR) Scale ; Nuffield,1982), it was evident that referrals were drawn from a higher risk offender population.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of risk levels for the sample of referrals. Close to 60% of the offenders fell within the two highest risk groups according to the SIR scale. In the Canadian federal offender population more generally, only about 42 % of offenders are assessed at this level of risk (Hann and Harman, 1988).

Program Effects on Attitudes, Behaviour and Cognition

A special effort has been made to design a systematic and thorough evaluation of the cognitive program in terms of its effects on attitudes, behaviour, and cognitive skills. Prior to the beginning of the program (pre-test), all potential program participants are administered a battery of measures designed to assess their level of cognitive skills and their attitudes toward criminal behaviour. Following completion of the program, offenders are reassessed (post-test) using the same instruments so that any changes can be measured.

Preliminary findings have been very promising. Results have indicated that offenders who received treatment showed statistically significant improvement on a number of important cognitive dimensions targeted by the program. The test scores have suggested that, following completion of Cognitive Skills Training, the participants are better able to appreciate the perspectives of others when they are faced with the task of interpreting social situations.

Scores on a conceptual level test have indicated that the offenders demonstrate more complexity in their views about such concepts as authority, rule structures, and critical feedback. In addition, they are able to generate a greater number of behavioral options on tasks that require the resolution of interpersonal conflicts.

The results from an analysis of attitudinal measures have shown that offenders also make positive changes in the direction of more pro-social thinking. It was found that the participants became less negative toward the law, courts and police after completing the program. In a number of previous studies, positive changes on these attitudinal measures have been linked to reduced chances of future recidivism (Andrews & Wormith, 1989).

The program participants expressed a high degree of satisfaction with Cognitive Skills Training. Seventy-four percent of the program participants who completed an evaluation questionnaire felt that the program "was much better than any other program" to which they had ever been exposed. An additional 24% perceived the program to be "as good as any other program". Approximately three weeks after completing the program, 97% of the participants admitted that they found themselves using the skills that they learned.

Responses to open-ended questions also revealed that the offenders regarded the content of the program as highly relevant to their lives. In fact, offenders commonly indicated they had retained many of the concepts that were developed in the program. They also identified a number of concrete areas in which they had made improvements as a result of their training. **Figure 2** shows the high proportion of offenders who perceived positive change in some of the major areas addressed by the program.

The research also examined how offenders were perceived as "changing" by coaches who delivered the program.

The coach ratings were based on the information collected on offenders during semi-structured interviews as well as in-program observations of the treatment group. As displayed in Table 1, the coach ratings focus on impulsivity, egocentricity, motivation and a variety of problem solving skills. Motivation was the only measure which did not demonstrate significant movement. Perhaps this reflects a ceiling effect in that all offenders were required to show a minimum level of motivation before they were considered for the program.

Another notable finding was that offenders who completed Cognitive Skills Training made significantly greater improvements on a self-report Impulsiveness scale. This finding is important since impulsiveness was one of the primary targets of the program, and it too has been linked with changes in criminal behaviour. These results are substantiated by coach perceptions of improvements on the impulse control of program participants.

POST RELEASE OUTCOMES

Early follow-up information on offenders who completed the Cognitive Skills Training Program is also encouraging. To date we have been able to examine the outcome status of 40 offenders who had been granted some form of conditional release and were followed up in the community for at least six months. On average, the follow-up period was 19.7 months. We also gathered information on the outcome of a comparison group of 23 offenders who were selected and volunteered for Cognitive Skills Training but did not participate (because of limited program space). These offenders did not differ from the program participants on a number of characteristics and were followed-up for a comparable period of time.

The post-release outcomes of the treatment and comparison group are displayed in Table 2. The figures show that offenders in the treatment group were readmitted for new convictions at a lower rate than the comparison group during the follow-up period. Specifically, only 20% of the treatment group were readmitted for new convictions compared to 30% of the offenders in the comparison group. It is interesting to note that the number of offenders who were returned to prison without new convictions (e.g., technical violations, day-parole terminations) is similar yet marginally larger in the treatment group. It is possible that the Cognitive Skills Training participants may be subjected to closer monitoring because of expectations regarding the program.

The results of this pilot follow-up can also be compared to expected outcomes that can be predicted from knowledge of the SIR scores of the released offenders (see Figure 3). The average probability of reconviction for both treatment and comparison groups is 52% based on available SIR score data ($n = 46$). This base rate would be expected after a post-release follow-up period of 2.5 years on either full-parole or mandatory supervision. Although the follow-up period for our sample is shorter (19.7 months), it is known that most recidivists are readmitted within the first year of release (for example, see Hann & Harman, 1988). It should also be noted that our sample includes offenders who were released on Day-Parole. Since day-parolees are not included in SIR recidivism predictions, we can assume that the expected base rate would be even higher for our sample.

In actuality, the estimated base rate is considerably higher than the reconviction rate we have observed for the treatment group (20%). This again suggests, quite convincingly, that the program is effective in reducing recidivism. The actual reconviction rate for the comparison group is also lower (30%) than the expected base rate, suggesting that motivation for treatment in and of itself may be influential in post-release success.

A second sample of 64 offenders from the initial pilot sites also received exposure to Cognitive Skills Training during 1989, prior to the implementation of the program on a national basis. We were also able to examine the post-release outcomes of this group, although no comparison group had been established for the purpose of comparing the recidivism rates of participants and non-participants. The number of offenders from this "extended pilot sample" who had been released (Day Parole, Full Parole or Mandatory Supervision) by March 31, 1991 included 42 offenders who had completed the program and 12 who had initially participated but did not complete the program.¹

After an average follow-up period of 12 months, only 2 of the 42 program completers (4.7%) had been readmitted for a new conviction. Assuming that this group of offenders

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¹ The reasons for non-completion included institutional transfers (5), dismissals from the program (5) and release (2).

was similar to the original pilot sample with respect to risk of recidivism, the reconviction rate of 4.7% after one year is remarkably lower than would be expected from base rates. As noted above, the expected base rate after a 2.5 year period would be approximately 50%.

It is also interesting to note that the Cognitive Skills completers had superior post-release outcomes than the 12 released offenders who did not complete the program. Among these offenders, 33.3% had been returned with new convictions during the one year follow-up period. Although this group may have possessed different characteristics from the treatment group, completion of the program does appear to be associated with better post-release outcomes.

FUTURE PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Drawing from the success of the Cognitive Skills Training program, the Correctional Service of Canada is now committed to implementing a broader strategy of "living skills" programming for offender's personal development. The strategy consists of a series of related program components, each of which addresses specific inmate problem areas that have consistently been highlighted in research literature as contributing to or maintaining criminal behaviour. Living Skills programming gives offenders training in areas such as parenting skills, anger management, attitudes towards domestic violence, community integration skills, employment skills and personal health care. The goal is to ensure that each of the program components are available at the appropriate time during the offender's sentence, so as to meet those needs which are most prominent and relevant in the process of preparing offenders for reintegration. This should be completed over the next two years.

Implementation of the Cognitive Skills Training program speaks to the core of our Mission - to actively encourage and assist offenders in becoming law-abiding citizens. The program fulfils the task by providing the means for offenders to acquire the skills and abilities required for pro-social adaptation.

In so doing, we respect Core Value 2 which states: "we shall recognize that the offender has the potential to live as a law-abiding citizen". Furthermore, by having Correctional Service of Canada staff provide the program to offenders, and through general staff awareness training, we reinforce our belief in Core Value 3: " that our strength and our major resource in achieving our objective is our staff, and that control can be assured through positive interaction between staff and offenders".

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TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLE 1

COACH RATINGS OF CHANGES IN OFFENDER BEHAVIOUR

	Significant Changes		Significantly Greater Changes
	Treatment	Comparison	
Problem Recognition	*		T
Problem Solving Ability	*	*	T
Developing Alternatives	*	*	T
Awareness of Consequences	*	*	T
Setting Goals	*	*	T
Egocentricity	*		T
Social Perspective Taking	*		T
Impulsivity	*	*	T
Cognitive Style	*		T
Motivation			

TABLE 2

COGNITIVE SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAM:

**POST RELEASE OUTCOME STATUS FOR
TREATMENT AND COMPARISON GROUPS**

	TREATMENT	COMPARISON
Readmissions with New Convictions	20.0% (8/40)	30.4% (7/23)
Readmissions without New Convictions	25.0% (10/40)	21.7% (5/23)
No Readmissions	55.0% (22/40)	47.9% (11/23)

Figure 1
Distribution of SIR Risk Groups:
Current Cognitive Skills Participants
Compared with Pilot and Normative Sample

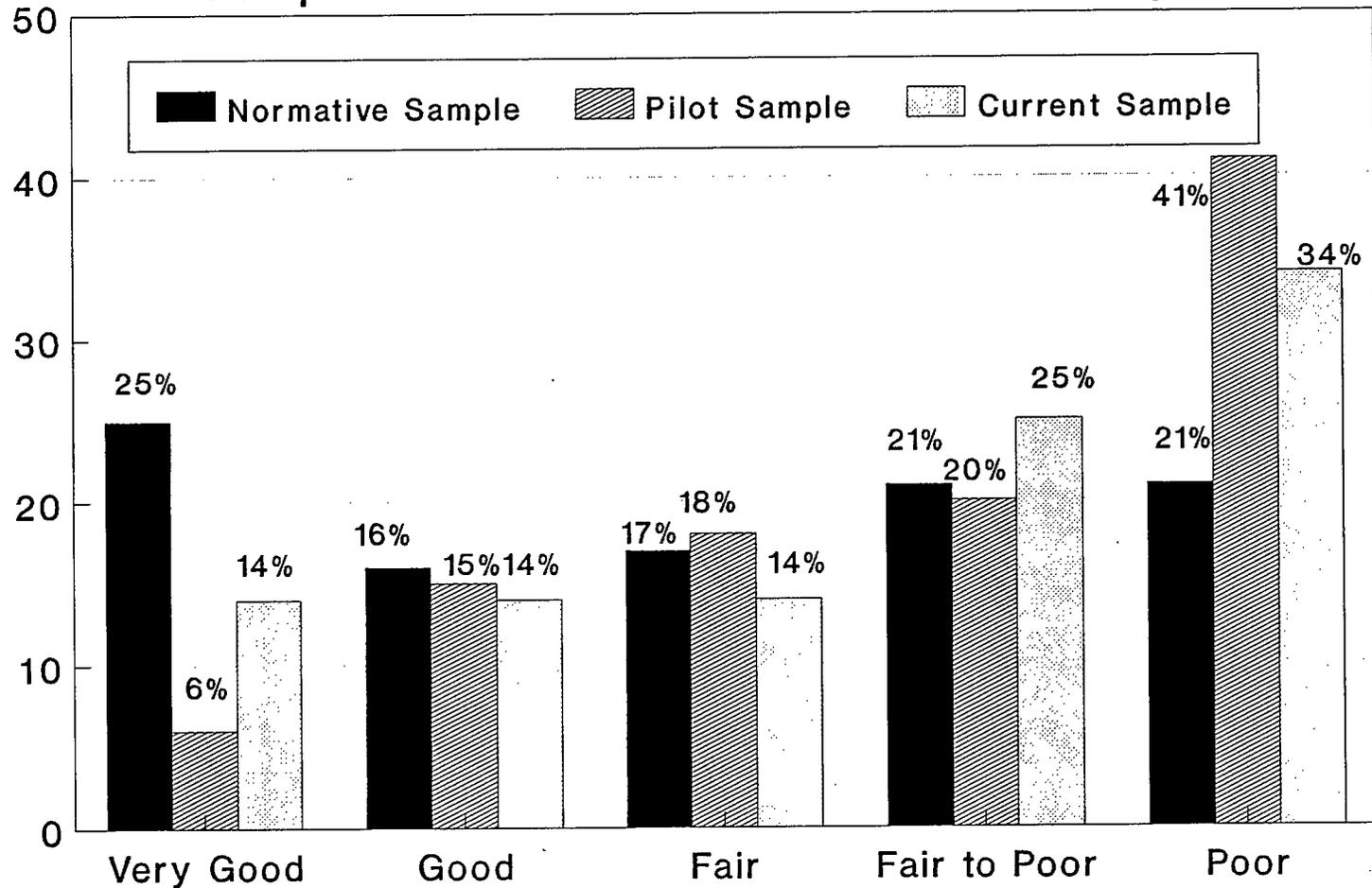


Figure 2
Percentage of Offenders Who Felt They
Improved in Eight Areas of Functioning

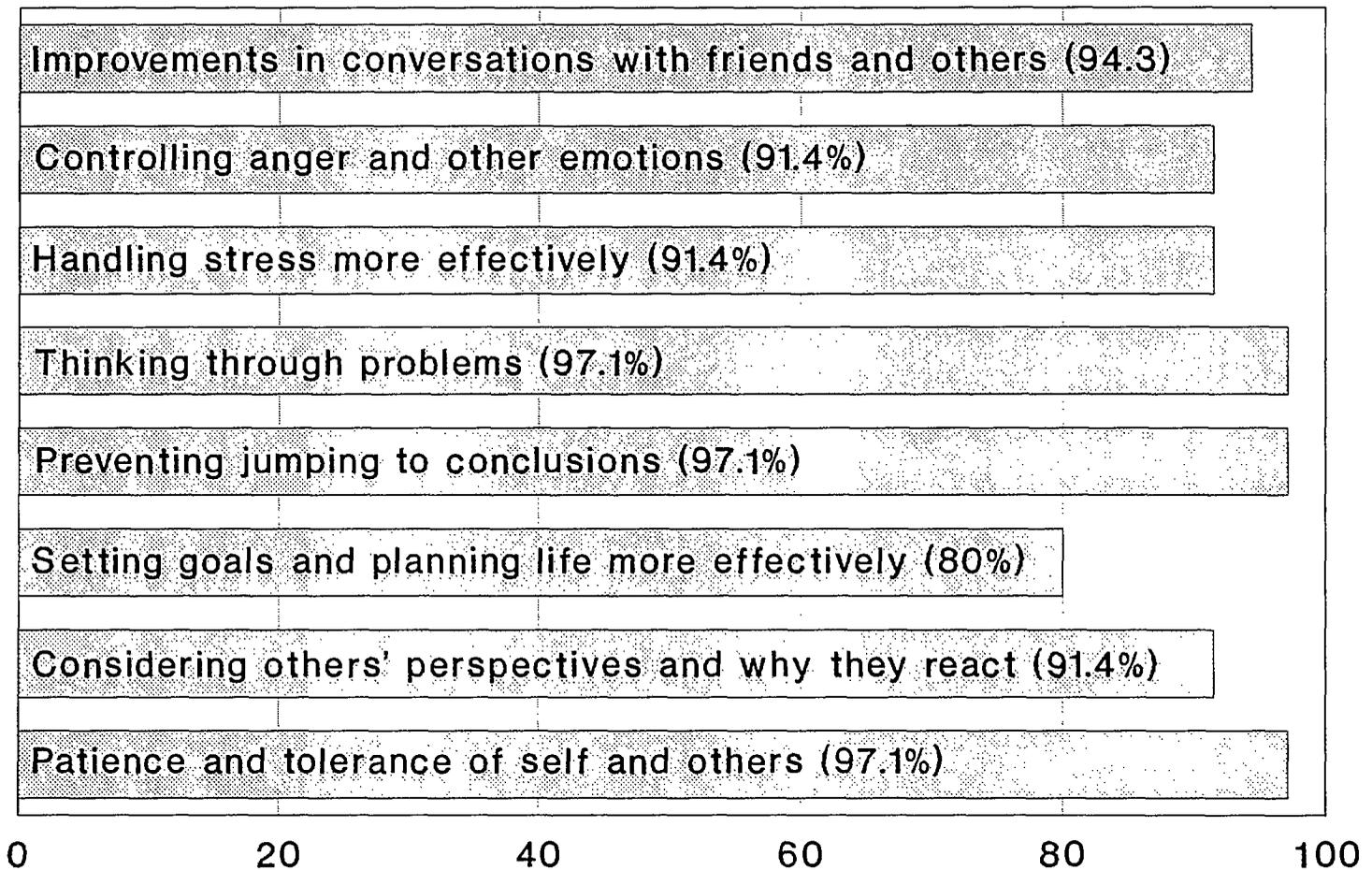


Figure 3
Comparison of Readmission for all
Release Types
(New Convictions Only)

