

PREVENCIÓN DEL DELITO

Crime prevention: More evidence-based analysis

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This paper introduces a new section of Psicothema dedicated to the evidence-based approach to crime prevention. Along with an original sexual-offender-treatment programme implemented in Spain, this section presents four systematic reviews of important subjects in the criminological arena, such as sexual offender treatment, the well-known «Reasoning and Rehabilitation» programme, the effectiveness of custodial versus non-custodial sanctions in reoffending and the fight against terrorism. We also highlight some of the focal points that scientists, practitioners and governments should take into account in order to support this evidence-based viewpoint of crime prevention.

La prevención del delito: más análisis basados en la evidencia. Este artículo introduce una nueva sección que la Revista *Psicothema* dedica a la aproximación basada en la evidencia en la prevención del delito. Junto a un estudio original acerca de un programa de tratamiento de delincuentes sexuales aplicado en España, esta sección ofrece cuatro revisiones sistemáticas en torno a tópicos relevantes de la Criminología, tales como el tratamiento de los delincuentes sexuales, el bien conocido programa «Razonamiento y Rehabilitación», la efectividad de las penas cortas en comparación con las largas, y las estrategias empleadas para combatir el terrorismo. También destacamos algunos de los puntos esenciales que los científicos, profesionales y gestores políticos deberían considerar con objeto de apoyar esta perspectiva basada en la evidencia.

In the Psicothema issue of 2006 (vol. 18, nº 3) we devoted a section to present to readers the meaning of a evidence-based approach applied to crime prevention, as well as some substantive examples of research conducted to analyse what practices are effective in areas such as serious incarcerated juvenile offenders, treatment for drug addict offenders or the effectiveness of social skill programmes for preventing delinquency. All these papers were the product of the Crime and Justice Group of the Campbell Collaboration, an international and growing group of dedicated social scientists from around the world representing many different disciplines who seek to promote evidence-based programmes to policy makers around the world (Garrido, Farrington, & Welsh, 2006). In this new section we present some new outputs of this evidence-based approach, at the same time as we highlight some of the focal points that scientists, practitioners and governments should take into account in order to support this policy.

With regard to the new works of evidence-based research that we present in this issue, we have two papers about sex offender treatment (Redondo & Garrido, 2008; Schmucker & Lösel, 2008), one study focusing on the effects of custodial versus non-custodial sanctions on recidivism (Killias & Villettaz, 2008), another tackling the evaluation of a well-known offender treatment programme (Tong & Farrington, 2008), and a fifth one that deals with the difficult task of knowing what works in the different initiatives oriented to combat the many sides of the terrorism phenomenon (Lum, Kennedy, & Sherley, 2008).

The first paper of this section opens with the first empirical evaluation ever made in Spain that assesses the recidivism of sexual offenders who took part in a treatment programme. In fact, in *Psychological treatment of sex offenders: an empirical study of its effectiveness*, Santiago Redondo — a prominent researcher included in the Advanced Studies Group on Violence at the University of Barcelona— and Vicente Garrido analyse the effectiveness of the programme «Sexual Aggression Control», a pioneer initiative started in a prison near Barcelona some years ago and now imitated by several prisons in other Spanish regions. In contrast with the other contributions for this section, this study is not a systematic review —which, as readers of the previous section about the evidence-based approach already know, it is the

core of this approach— but an evaluation study of an implemented programme. Its relevance for Spanish criminology and psychology can not be overstated: Redondo and Garrido explain that, after the treatment established in an ordinary prison during more than one year, the treated sexual inmates re-offended about ten percent less than sexual offenders that were not treated.

The paper of Martin Schmucker and Friedrich Lösel (*Does sexual offender treatment work? A systematic review of outcome evaluations*) is a very necessary systematic review of sexual offender treatment and, like the other papers presented in this section, conducted under the guidelines of the Campbell Crime and Justice Group, devoted to promote the evidence-based policy on crime prevention. Unlike narrative reviews, systematic reviews have explicit objectives, explicit criteria for including or excluding studies, and explicit statements about methods used to research for studies (Farrington & Petrosino, 2001). The Schmucker and Lösel study is very welcome, not only because sexual offending is a kind of crime about which the general public is particularly concerned, but also due to the fact that early reviews of this issue revealed considerable inconsistency. The conclusion of this systematic review shows how the usual policy of governments on sex offenders can be misleading. On the one hand, discussions in the media and in the political arena are emotionally laden and even legislation often seems to be driven by serious single cases of sexual offending. On the other hand, as the authors of this study write, «our results indicate that sexual offender treatment can significantly reduce recidivism rates. The size of the effect is small to moderate but it is in accord with what we know from the larger research literature on general offender treatment evaluation».

Tony Tong and David Farrington aim to review the structured programme perhaps more widely-used in the world for the treatment of offenders: *Effectiveness of «Reasoning and Rehabilitation» in reducing reoffending*. We are indeed faced with a programme that Robert Ross and his colleagues disseminated in several countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and even Spain, although the results in this country were not taken into account in this review due to the lack of recidivism information (Ross & Ross, 1995). The «Reasoning and Rehabilitation» programme is a cognitive skills programme which aims to change the criminogenic thinking of offenders, and it is based in the results of many years of applied research that have consistently demonstrated that many offenders present a lack of social and cognitive skills that contribute to the development of their antisocial careers (Ross & Fabiano, 1985).

This paper is a good example of the necessity to address specific questions that can illuminate the practice of deliverers of rehabilitation programmes. In relation to the effectiveness of this programme, Tong and Farrington do not just focus on the effectiveness as a whole issue (is the «Reasoning and Rehabilitation» programme effective in reducing reoffending?), but instead formulate five questions that help very much in order to understand how «Reasoning and Rehabilitation» *really works*. Here are some of them: Does it work better in community or institutional settings? Does it work better for high risk or low risk offenders? Or see this other question, with the emphasis put on the advancement of the knowledge, a definitive seal of the evidence-based approach: What improvements might be made to the programme?

Martin Killias and Patrice Villettaz, in their paper titled *The effects of custodial versus non-custodial sanctions on re-*

offending: lessons from a systematic review, prove again —as in the case of the Schmucker and Lösel paper— that the scientific evidence must be always the guide of a informed criminal policy, unless we prefer to follow the established truths, without asking if things are really as they seem. For that reason, when the authors state that «Since the mid-19th century, it was common knowledge, if not dogma, that short-term imprisonment is ‘damaging’ because (...) incarceration for shorter periods does not last long enough to ‘cure’ criminal propensities (seen as a kind of disease), but still too long to avoid first-time offenders to be exposed to the risk of contamination by hard-core criminals», they are going to put this «known truth» to the test, and show us what happens if we take into account the results of «four randomized controlled experiments and the one natural experiment whose internal validity seems beyond doubt».

The reader will have to consult the paper in order to know if, for example, sanctions consisting in offenders using devices such as electronic monitoring in the community or having their sentences suspended are more or less effective than going to prison for a short time. However, although this result without doubt is important, there are some other points in the Killias and Villettaz contribution the reader should not miss, in particular when they elaborate about the improvement of the evaluations, drawing some lessons from the systematic review. We strongly recommend to pay attention to the arguments the authors expose regarding the necessity of increasing the number of randomised controlled trials as the best way of increasing our knowledge about the results of our efforts in terms of sanctions and other rehabilitation practices, in contrast to the usual reasons given by facility and different service managers and practitioners for not carrying out this type of design.

The last paper of this section is by Lum, Kennedy and Sherley: *Is counter-terrorism policy evidence-based? What works, what harms, and what is unknown*. As the authors point out, after events such as the September 11th incident in United States or the attacks in London and Madrid, there has been an enormous increase in the money and research dedicated to combat terrorism in a wide range of efforts, including law enforcement approaches, victims’ treatment and different strategies and counter-terrorism programmes. It would seem that this area has to deal with great obstacles in order to implement an evidence-based approach, given the ideological and political pressures that governments have to confront. However, due to the amount of suffering and personal costs that terrorism causes, nothing else could be more necessary. Lum and her colleagues indeed found only a small percentage of empirical studies of terrorism, and «an almost complete absence of evaluation research on counter-terrorism strategies (...). Even more disconcerting was the nature of the evaluations we did find; some programs were shown to either have no discernible effect on terrorism or lead to *increases* in terrorism».

These finding led the authors to assert that counter-terrorism policy is indeed not evidence-based and to recommend that steps should be taken to make it more so. We think that this is a statement that all of us can generalize to social sciences as a whole. In a recent paper designed to analyse and compare the prevention of violence in seven countries, Junger et al. (in press) reflected on the causes political leaders could have for not paying attention to the results of empirical studies in order to decide which policy should local and central governments promote. One

possibility is to concentrate on educating our politicians on the need for rigorous research to find out what truly works and what does not. Another is that researchers start to employ a language that policy makers understand, and to give them quick and easy access to summaries of what works and what does not in a specific topic.

In any case it is very good news to learn that the evidence-based approach is a trend that is growing in these days. Psychology as a discipline has recently supported it explicitly, as a result of the APA 2005 Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, which agreed on the following definition: «Evidence-based practice in psychology is the integration of the best available research with clinical expertise in the context of patient characteristics, culture and preferences» (APA, 2006, p. 273). This policy statement was adopted as association policy by the APA Council of Representatives in August 2005.

The statement «best research evidence» is the substance of this new approach in social sciences, as well as it was twenty years

ago in the field of medicine, which advocated for improved patient outcomes by informing clinical practice with relevant research. This battle is now in progress in Criminology: in the seven countries surveyed by Junger et al (in press) it was well evident that «behavioural scientists are attempting to convince policy makers of the necessity of evidence-based decision-making as the basis for sound policies». It seems that, in order to win this war, two main problems should be first conquered: to convince policy makers of the utility of randomized controlled trials to serve as the foundation for the evidence, and to have a single, coordinated policy to prevent and fight crime and violence, given the general and frequent difficulties that different people in each country have to share and implement positive, well founded practices.

As a small but significant step towards this end, we feel proud of presenting in this issue of *Psicothema* five new contributions of evidence-based research to fight crime and violence.

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