



A  
Profile of  
Correctional  
Effectiveness  
and New  
Directions  
for Research

Ted Palmer

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CORRECTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND  
NEW DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

BY  
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STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Published by  
State University of New York Press, Albany

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For information, address the State University of New York Press,  
State University Plaza, Albany, NY 12246

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Palmer, Ted,

A profile of correctional effectiveness and new directions for  
research / by Ted Palmer.

p. cm. — (SUNY series, New directions in crime and justice  
studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7914-1909-6 (alk. paper). — ISBN 0-7914-1910-X  
(pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Corrections—Evaluation. 2. Corrections—Research.  
3. Corrections—United States. I. Title. II. Series.  
HV9275.P347 1994

364.6'0973—dc20

93-24925  
CIP

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## Foreword

When policy scholars pronounced rehabilitation “dead” in the mid-1970s, much of the field was prepared to bury it. Critics of American sentencing practices blamed the idea of rehabilitation for everything from a rising crime rate to prison unrest. Nearly everything wrong with the correctional system, including both overly harsh prison terms (because of indeterminacy) and excessive leniency (because judges and parole officers coddled offenders), was traced to adoption of the rehabilitative ideal. Rehabilitation was said to cost too much and yield too little and to confuse the true punitive nature of corrections with social work. Even worse, some argued that under the guise of benevolence (“we’re here to help you avoid a life of crime”), the state coercively intervened in the psychology of individuals whose only “crimes” were to be incorrigible or to have been declared “a delinquent.”

Although a strong commitment to the rehabilitative ideal, was, even in the 1970s, disputable, the abandonment of the *possibility* of efficient and effective treatment fairly swept the field. Deterrence and incapacitation came into favor in policy circles and in the academy, with some arguing that it may be possible to save both money and innocent victims using incarceration programs that emphasized fear and isolation. Although treatment may be a noble idea, argued many policy scholars, it too often interfered with doing justice.

Consequently, when a few well-publicized literature reviews claimed to show, on the basis of the best available research, the ineffectiveness of treatment for delinquency and crime, it seemed almost possible to hear the field heave a collective sigh of relief. Doing good and doing justice did not really conflict if doing good was, after all, impossible. And the potential savings to the taxpayer were handsome. As one knowledgeable professor was fond of saying in those days, “if we can’t save souls, at least we can save money!”

Well, from the perspective of the 1990s, the taxpayer most certainly would have been better off trying to save souls, because the policy shift to deterrence and incapacitation has certainly not been cheap. By almost any measure the situation subsequent to the adoption of policies favoring deterrence and incapacitation has become much worse. The crime rate, measured by police statistics, rose substantially during the 1980s and

remains at very high levels. The number (and rates per 100,000) of individuals under some form of state supervision has skyrocketed. Nearly 500,000 more adults were incarcerated as of 1990 and 1991 than only ten years earlier. By 1990 more than 1,500 additional adults were incarcerated each week in the United States and the adults under parole or probation supervision was a staggering 3.2 million. The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimated that on any given day in 1990 in the United States about 1 in every 24 adult men was on some form of correctional supervision (all statistics from U.S. Department of Justice, 1992). As a result, correctional spending (principally for prisons) has been, during the decade of the 1990s, among the fastest growing part of state budgets, second only to health care.

It once was fashionable to deride rehabilitation programs by pointing out that, when pressed to account for the apparent lack of accomplishments, proponents of rehabilitation would claim "it has never really been tried." A little more money, better standards and training, and sufficient time will reveal that success is just around the corner. Today, proponents of the deterrent effectiveness of incarceration plead much the same: If we only have the courage to stick to harsh, mandatory prison terms for just about everyone convicted of a crime, if we only can show the will to apply incapacitation and deterrence to juveniles and first offenders, if we wait a bit longer so that the fear of imprisonment can trickle down to the street level, then we will begin to reap the benefits of this correctional spending spree. Well, if turnabout is fair play (and in this case it surely is not play), then just when, the beleaguered taxpayer might ask, will we begin to see some inkling of improvement from current policies, if not after a fourfold increase in incarceration and the highest per capita expenditure for criminal justice in history?

Policy currents are difficult to predict in criminal justice. It may well be that concern about crime and a short-term orientation, both of which may be said to characterize the American public, have forced legislators and other policy makers into a costly and lengthy tailspin. More criminal justice intervention may be the only politically feasible response to a failure to lower the criminal rate, and each proposal for harsher, more mandatory punishment must be approved for fear of appearing soft on crime.

In such an environment, the programmatic experimentation that Ted Palmer calls for, and that is necessary in order to improve our knowledge, provides a strong challenge to and a clear choice for the correctional system—a system whose present harsh realities would stifle learning or lead it to ignore such experimentation. But in today's environment, optimism may be as rational as pessimism; there is some reason to believe

that the expansiveness of the incapacitation/deterrence movement will so encumber the state that a revival of experimentation in treatments will be forced on agencies struggling to cope with the burdens of ever-increasing caseloads.

Meanwhile, not everyone so readily condescended to the pronouncements of various policy scholars that a detailed review of the research literature called for pessimistic conclusions. In particular, careful scholars pointed out that some interventions did indeed seem to have some effectiveness for some individuals. Several social scientists, Ted Palmer perhaps being the first and among the most persistent, refused to allow the glib summaries to go unchallenged. If the requirement of effective treatment was the discovery of a panacea, then, sure enough, the policy scholars were correct. And, it was (remains) true that the perfectly controlled experiment with random assignment, complete integrity of treatment, high dosage, no sample attrition, and completely valid and indisputable outcome data were not reported. But, of course, threats to the validity of research (which, given sufficient creativity, should always be possible) are not dispositive evidence that the results are misleading. In fact, as revealed in *A Profile of Correctional Effectiveness and New Directions for Research*, the meta-analyses and literature reviews undertaken in recent years have shown that it has been the sweeping claims of ineffectiveness that have most likely been misleading.

Ted Palmer has chosen in this book to focus attention on evaluations of programs for juveniles and adolescents. It is both ironic and unfortunate that so much of the policy debate about correctional effectiveness, the purposes of imprisonment, appropriate sentencing structures, and the like, has centered on the adult criminal justice system. Crime statistics have always suggested that we should be much more concerned with juvenile justice programs. For one thing, it has been reasonably well established that most of the crime problem is the responsibility of young people (teen and preteen years). Crime rates rise rapidly through the preteen years, peak in late adolescence and early adulthood, and then fall rapidly and consistently throughout life. Such a distribution focuses attention on juveniles, particularly young juveniles, as the point of maximum feasible impact on crime rates. Even modest success for programs with a juvenile focus could provide substantial returns relative to adult programs.

In addition, most research on delinquency causation now strongly suggests that early interventions are more likely to be effective over the life-course than are later interventions because there seems to be considerable stability of individual differences in crime rates over time. Thus,

apart from our traditional instincts to help children and juveniles that derive from compassion, the evidence suggests a strong utilitarian rationale for a focus on juvenile correctional and intervention programs.

In this book Ted Palmer asks us to take a fresh approach to research on intervention programs. He shows it is no longer satisfactory to study individual programs in isolation, to ignore the complexity of programs in favor of simple descriptions of intended categories of treatment, or to ignore the real-life setting of action programs. Rather, what is now required is to carefully collect more useful information about programs, to attend to their many dimensions, to replicate successes and to seek their generalization to other populations, to cease simplistic assessments and to begin building systematic knowledge.

This book is the plea of a scientist to seek knowledge for the long term and to acknowledge complexities in our work larger than we have previously been prepared to accept. Ted Palmer provides a much-needed blueprint for the design of research studies that will make knowledge building more likely, a blueprint that offers a way to better conceptualize the difficult task ahead. He introduces and carefully describes new analytic strategies, specific procedures, and sets of specific variables that can be applied to future research studies to help us understand the nature of complex, often-multifaceted programs.

*A Profile of Correctional Effectiveness and New Directions for Research* shows us that we need to study programs in all their dimensions, to study process, to increase variations, and to document in detail what we do, in order to provide the information needed for the creation of a field of knowledge. By conceptualizing the task ahead and its specific goals, and by providing strategies, procedures, and analytic units that could help researchers achieve those goals, this book provides a major foundation for the creation of that knowledge, and it describes what should become the next decade of treatment research. It also identifies new ways in which the control programs that are part of experimental/control designs can directly add to knowledge. Although the book goes well beyond a review of treatment effectiveness, its early chapters provide a systematic review of many specific treatments that have been used to date. This review, which is based on the findings and conclusions of numerous meta-analyses and literature reviews, provides a careful and wide-ranging integration of what has been learned thus far about whether those specific treatments increase public protection.

The place of rehabilitation in juvenile and adult justice systems has always involved an interaction between fact and values. For some, rehabilitation will always be inappropriate as a justification for state

intervention. For such people, the faintest indication of ineffectiveness is all that is required as an empirical refutation. For others, the very possibility of rehabilitation is an essential value for our society, and thus the dimmest glimmer of empirical hope is all that is required to maintain rehabilitation as a justification. But probably for most people, neither ready to believe in the magic bullet nor willing to concede defeat so early, the important questions are whether some programs work better than others for some offenders, whether there are less expensive and more humane methods of dealing with offenders that do not substantially increase risk to the community, and whether objective reviews of the research provide any clues for the future. These are the people who should read this book and learn the insights of an experienced researcher and careful scholar.

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# *Acknowledgments*

I wish to thank Ms. Christine Lynch of SUNY Press for her excellent work in guiding the manuscript through all phases of its production. I also thank Ms. Carol Newhouse for her outstanding copy editing—easily the best I’ve ever seen.

# Preface

For nearly two decades the question of whether correctional intervention is effective has generated interest, confusion, and controversy. Several articles have addressed this question, and more than two dozen literature reviews and meta-analyses have examined many effectiveness studies. Sometimes, a handful of reviews or analyses have been compared with each other, and when this has occurred their findings have sometimes been inconsistent. Yet, whether or not their outcomes agreed, seldom were more than a few such works examined together. Thus, the broad power of corrections' already available findings has remained untapped, since its many literature reviews and meta-analyses were never assembled and compared *en masse*—for instance, regarding the question, Does intervention reduce recidivism and thereby protect the public?

This book begins to tap that power. It does so by assembling thirty-two reviews and analyses and by examining their findings collectively. It determines—on a much larger scale than before—the extent to which results from numerous studies of intervention support and differ from each other, and whether consistent patterns exist. To achieve this result it examines the extent and areas of agreement and disagreement that exist across the many analyses and reviews.

The book mainly focuses on juvenile offenders in community and institutional settings. It targets twenty types of intervention, including confrontation, diversion, the behavioral, the cognitive, three types of counseling, and intensive probation supervision, among others. It addresses not only the effectiveness of those several interventions individually but also that of all such types together—thus, of intervention as a whole, or collectively.

This review of more than two dozen meta-analyses and literature reviews of numerous intervention approaches is, in effect, an overview and integration of corrections' overviews—each of which, individually, is both limited and somewhat different from others as to setting, offender sample, time period covered, and intervention approaches. The book is thus designed to help practitioners and policy makers, on the one hand, and researchers, academicians, and students, on the other, obtain a broader, more reliable, better balanced, and perhaps less confusing view of intervention's present utility and future potential than has been provided to date.

Based on this extensive review, several intervention approaches are identified that have been substantially less likely than others to reduce recidivism. In contrast, other approaches are identified that have been considerably more likely to succeed. A consistent picture of intervention's *overall* effectiveness emerges as well, as do definite limitations.

Taken as a whole, this overview and integration clearly indicates that although no all-purpose approaches exist, several "types" of intervention show considerable promise and many individual programs are effective. Equally clear, however, is the fact that corrections has a long way to go before it will contain many programs that are simultaneously very successful and widely applicable. Yet this goal, we believe, can be achieved.

To help achieve this and more modest goals, the book introduces and discusses the following view: In order to make continued and substantial progress in building knowledge about effective intervention, a broader research strategy is needed than has been used thus far. In the proposed strategy, correctional programs would be conceptualized and analyzed as the composites and complex wholes that they *are*—or very often are. They would no longer be described in over-simplified ways and mainly studied as little more than one-dimensional operations. To continue studying intervention in this manner would place major, unnecessary constraints on knowledge building.

Though the proposed strategy would be challenging and difficult to implement, it is clearly needed and could infuse intervention research with a new and deeper sense of direction. Moreover, it would increase this area's relevance. In the long run, the proposed multidimensional emphasis could provide corrections with a better understanding and more realistic portrayal of intervention than exists today and would otherwise exist tomorrow.

This book does not simply define or diagnose a current need, then point toward broad yet basic goals and leave the reader wondering, How does one get there? It does not just challenge or urge readers to work more systematically and vigorously toward such major goals as (a) better describing correctional approaches and the individual programs that comprise them, and (b) identifying key factors that contribute to success. That is, it does not just challenge without suggesting ways to proceed. Instead, the book provides guidance and directions, particularly by introducing and discussing strategies for achieving those goals. It specifies, for the first time, a set of interrelated concepts, tools, and analytic procedures that could help build the type of knowledge now needed.

We believe that if the proposed strategies, concepts, and procedures are given heavy emphasis, corrections—in the future—will be able to

accurately and adequately describe effective programs and will understand the main factors and combinations of factors responsible for that success. Policy makers, practitioners, and others could then use this information and insight to develop new programs and improve existing ones. This ability would help corrections play an increasingly broad and valuable role.

# *Introduction*

Beginning in the mid-1980s, several meta-analyses and literature reviews appeared that bore on two long-standing questions: Does correctional intervention—particularly rehabilitation—reduce recidivism and thus contribute to public protection? and, If and when intervention reduces offending, what kind of programs are involved?

The background for these questions is generally well known but far from simple. Briefly, from the 1960s to early 1970s there was a broad surge of confidence regarding rehabilitation's seeming ability to change and control offenders (President's Commission, 1967; Warren, 1971; Palmer, 1974; Glaser, 1975). This high optimism was quickly followed by widespread pessimism during the period 1975–81, a pessimism triggered by Martinson's mid-1970s critique of rehabilitation's presumed effectiveness (Martinson, 1974; Greenberg, 1977; Sechrest, White, and Brown, 1979). By 1983–84 evidence for Martinson's "relatively-little-works" view and for an alternative, "several-things-sometimes-work" view had been marshalled and became increasingly known (Palmer, 1978; Romig, 1978; Gendreau and Ross, 1979). As a result, a mixed and unsettled atmosphere emerged regarding effectiveness. More precisely, considerable confusion and uncertainty existed.

Yet one thing became clear: neither the deep pessimism of the middle and later 1970s nor the global optimism of the 1960s seemed justified. Instead, more moderate views took shape and soon became widely known, especially among researchers and academicians (Empey, 1978; Martin, Sechrest, and Redner, 1981; Palmer, 1983). This included a relatively open-minded skepticism on the one hand and a more cautious optimism on the other. Meanwhile, most practitioners believed programming was helpful, yet many wondered if that help was substantial. Other individuals were neutral but not uninvolved.

Since the mid-1970s more than twenty literature reviews have addressed correctional effectiveness; from the mid-1980s to the present, nine meta-analyses have done the same. Usually, these works examined an aggregate of forty-five to ninety individual studies each (the median is seventy-five); some focused on more than one hundred studies and one even had several hundred.<sup>1</sup> Based on the findings of these studies, each reviewer and analyst drew conclusions about the effectiveness of (a)

particular types of correctional intervention, for example, vocational training; (b) correctional intervention as a whole, that is, the several separate types collectively; or (c) both (a) and (b). Several authors of these works, for example, Romig (1978), Gendreau and Ross (1979, 1987), and Andrews et al. (1990), expressed largely positive views about (a) and/or (b). Others, for example, Martinson (1974), Greenberg (1977), and Whitehead and Lab (1989), expressed generally negative views. Still others—perhaps the majority (e.g., Rutter and Giller [1983], Gordon and Arbuthnot [1987], Gottschalk et al. [1987], and Lipsey [1992])—emphasized mixed results.

To date, this large body of individual literature reviews and meta-analyses has never been examined in the aggregate, that is, as a single group or collection. In particular, such an examination has not been conducted relative to the question, Does intervention reduce recidivism and thereby protect the public? Yet, an overview of these more than thirty reviews and analyses could be especially useful. It could determine if the overall findings from the respective works mainly support or largely differ and diverge from each other, and if general agreement exists regarding particular types of intervention. As such, it could provide timely information about correctional effectiveness that is more broadly based and reliable than before. Conclusions and generalizations from such an overview would not, of course, constitute the “final word.” However, they would require fewer caveats than those associated with any one, two, or even handful of reviews or analyses.<sup>2</sup>

Caveats regarding individual literature reviews and meta-analyses that have been carried out to date either have reflected or should have reflected various limitations associated with those works. For example, they should have reflected the fact that many such works focused largely or entirely on one particular *setting*, such as the institutional or community. That limitation, in turn, interacted with *offender-representation*. For instance, because some “types” of offenders (e.g., the violent or previously violent) were strongly represented in given types of settings (e.g., the institutional), other categories of offenders (e.g., the nonviolent) were less likely to be found in those settings—and, thus, in analyses/reviews that centered on those settings. Though the degree of representation that existed for certain categories of offenders in given analyses/reviews may have been appropriate or unavoidable, this situation nevertheless limited or should have limited the conclusions and generalizations that were drawn in those analyses/reviews regarding intervention’s effectiveness. That was the case because differing types of intervention may have been differentially effective with different types of offenders. (Despite this

situation, a fairly wide *range* of offenders was included in most analyses and reviews, even though their representation may have been *unequal* within and across those works—and especially unequal in the individual studies that comprised the respective analyses/reviews.<sup>3)</sup> The above implies that interactions may have also existed by *type of intervention*—as, for example, with social casework, family intervention, or intensive probation supervision, which occurred more often in one type of setting (the community) than another.

Finally, another limitation related to *time*, and this applied to almost all meta-analyses and literature reviews. Specifically, although correctional interventions have been studied for thirty to thirty-five years at a moderately frequent and fairly steady rate, many analyses and reviews covered roughly six to twelve years each—and many of these periods, for example, 1960–72, 1974–80, or 1978–87 (and therefore the respective studies that were included in the analyses/reviews), did not necessarily or largely overlap. Though this truncated coverage was quite appropriate for specific purposes and although it was sometimes unavoidable (especially in earlier reviews/analyses), it nevertheless constituted a limitation regarding conclusions about intervention's overall effectiveness. It was a source of inconsistent findings from one analysis/review to the next, as well.

Even if the limitations associated with most individual literature reviews and meta-analyses had been small to moderate, an overview of those and remaining works *collectively* could provide added and more reliable information about the effectiveness of intervention overall. In addition, it could provide a more broadly based and perhaps a more objective or balanced composite profile of intervention's often-used, respective *approaches*. In particular, an overview could provide such a profile if the studies that are examined are—collectively—not just numerous but unselected and if they are—again, collectively—widely representative and inclusive as to settings, types of offenders, and time periods. Such an overview or integration of corrections' many individual meta-analyses and literature reviews could thus provide information—and a broader perspective—that might help practitioners, policy makers, researchers, and others better sort out and assess various conclusions that have been drawn regarding effectiveness.

Chapter 1 of this book describes the different ways that meta-analyses and literature reviews summarize or integrate information from a collection of individual studies, and how these respective methods shed light on somewhat differing as well as overlapping aspects of intervention. The chapter also describes the methods used in the present overview and integration of thirty-two meta-analyses and literature reviews, and

how the authors of those works generally organized them by “type” of intervention.

Chapter 2 summarizes, one by one, ten of the thirty-two meta-analyses and literature reviews that have been among the best known, the most extensive, and/or the most recent. It focuses on the findings and conclusions of those works for correctional intervention *overall*. That is, it emphasizes not so much the separate types of intervention (though these are sometimes described as well) as the collective results for the several approaches taken together. The chapter also reviews key factors that contributed to the findings and conclusions of those separate meta-analyses and literature reviews, factors such as type of intervention approach and type of techniques used in the analysis.

Chapter 3 presents the results of the thirty-two meta-analyses and literature reviews for each of twenty subject-areas or intervention approaches *individually*. These areas or approaches include confrontation, diversion, the behavioral, the cognitive-behavioral or cognitive, life-skills methods, and intensive probation supervision, among others.

Chapter 4 describes the major trends regarding correctional effectiveness that emerge from the findings of the several analyses and reviews *collectively*. It then describes problem areas and underlying factors that contribute to those findings and that appear to limit them. The chapter also reviews the amount of recidivism reduction observed across the several approaches.

Drawing from the preceding chapters, chapter 5 discusses the absence of “all-purpose”—for example, very reliable yet widely applicable—intervention approaches. It examines several major factors related to this absence, such as limited program relevance, the level or adequacy of program implementation, and the adequacy of traditional (i.e., control or comparison) programs themselves. In this connection the chapter also describes the multidimensional nature of intervention approaches in particular—this being a factor seldom examined to date.

Chapter 6 proposes a new direction for intervention research: the study of *combinations* of features that comprise given programs. The chapter describes the nature, scope, and initial challenges involved in such research. It also discusses the need to examine interventions as composites of programmatic as well as nonprogrammatic factors, such as staff characteristics and staff/client interactions.

Chapter 7 discusses several needs and issues involved in increasing the quality, strength, and relevance of research studies. It introduces specific analytic units or features that can provide a foundation for more accurately describing and better understanding intervention than has been

possible to date. It also discusses the general nature of process-features such as staff/client interactions and intervention strategies/techniques.

Chapters 8 and 9 describe ways of implementing the proposed new research on combinations or multiple features. They address the question, How might one determine which programmatic and nonprogrammatic features, combinations, and broad patterns contribute to successful programs? Using the analytic units described in the preceding chapter, chapter 8 presents a step-by-step “building-block” method designed to identify contributing features and combinations. Chapter 9 introduces a more holistic, yet also systematic, “global” approach for identifying key ingredients of effective programs, especially programs whose actual operations may be relatively complex and perhaps involve several interactions among components. Both chapters provide specific, logically simple procedures for addressing the above question.

Chapter 10 reviews the need for multiple-features research—a type and degree of investigation that would make it possible to adequately describe and understand the complexities of real-life interventions. The chapter points out the implications of single-feature analysis—that is, unidimensional or “salient-feature” analysis—for the results presented in chapters 3 and 4. It also discusses the priority that should be given to the global and building-block approaches through and beyond the 1990s and to studying *why* given interventions work.

The final chapters focus on particular technical and conceptual issues. Chapter 11 examines success criteria, a key aspect of intervention research. The discussion centers on criteria that can be useful when evaluating the efficacy of intervention in relation to specified goals and needs. The chapter also discusses the averaging of results from several positive-outcome studies. Both topics pertain to single- as well as multiple-features analyses. Chapter 12 describes the nature of “decisive” or “deciding” factors. This subject bears on multiple-features research in that, (a) although several of a program’s components may contribute to its effectiveness whereas only relatively few of them may be *sine qua non*s, (b) only one or two of the latter components may actually put a program “over the top” with regard to success. The chapter also discusses formal dimensions of “change”—an important topic given the often-dynamic and phased nature of many real-life interventions.

Several appendices describe other aspects of intervention research that have received little attention to date and/or enlarge the discussion found in given chapters. Appendix F, for instance, focuses on rarely—if ever—examined issues involving control programs in experimental/control studies, and it illustrates the challenging implications of these issues,