

# English summary

## Teaching a new way of thinking. An evaluation of the Cognitive Skills programme in the prison and probation service, 1995 – 2000

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Research over the last two decades into the rehabilitation of persons convicted of criminal offences has shown which forms of treatment are effective and the kind of results that may be expected. The picture we have at present indicates that effective treatment programmes are structured, and that they focus on dynamic factors – open to influence – that are associated with criminal behaviour. In addition, effective programmes provide an opportunity for in depth, meaningful contacts between treatment staff and participants. Effective programmes are those that succeed in altering the behaviour and attitudes of participants by giving them opportunities to practice newly acquired skills and behaviours.

Those studies that have examined the effects of treatment programmes on reoffending show moderate reductions in reoffending levels by comparison with control groups comprised of non-participants. Findings from meta-analyses – i.e. analyses that aggregate the results from several studies at once – indicate that levels of reoffending among programme participants are reduced by between five and ten per cent.

### **COGNITIVE SKILLS TEACHES A NEW WAY OF THINKING**

The Cognitive Skills programme was developed in Canada during the 1980s. It provides the participants with new techniques for examining and altering the way they think, thereby facilitating a change in behaviour. In addition to Canada, England and the USA, the programme is currently available in all the Nordic countries. It was introduced for use in the Swedish prison and probation service in 1995.

During the programme, the participants learn to define and solve problems, to develop social skills, to deal with emotions and think creatively, to increase their awareness of their own values and to develop a more critical approach in their thinking. The few scientific evaluations of the programme that have been published show weak but positive results in relation to levels of re-offending among participants.

#### **THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CRIME PREVENTION'S EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAMME IS BASED ON FOUR DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES**

The evaluation of Cognitive Skills conducted by the National Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ) illuminates the use of the programme in Sweden from four different perspectives. BRÅ examined whether the programme had any short-term effect on participants by means of an analysis of test results collected immediately after the programme. Longer-term effects were studied in part by means of an analysis of re-offending, and in part by means of interviews. Finally, the results of questionnaires sent to programme leaders and staff working at units that offer the Cognitive Skills programme, illustrate the extent to which conditions are suited to carrying out the programme in a beneficial manner.

The study included 523 participants, the vast majority of whom were men who had participated in the programme in prison. Of those starting the programme, slightly under three-quarters see it through to completion. Among women participants, the vast majority complete the programme and among participants serving probationary sentences, the proportion of programme-completers lies at slightly over one-half. Programme-completers are compared throughout the study with non-completers. The present analysis of re-offending compares male programme participants serving prison sentences (339 individuals) with a control group of offenders carefully matched using registry data relating to their criminal careers. Re-offending is defined for both programme participants and controls as an additional court adjudication resulting in a sentence to prison or probation

#### **PROGRAMME PARTICIPANTS MORE PRO-SOCIAL IN THE SHORT TERM**

Participants in the programme complete three tests concerning their sense of coherence in life, the personality traits impulsiveness, adventuresomeness and empathy, their attitudes towards the justice system, tolerance for crime and the extent to which they are criminally identified. The tests are completed both prior to and directly after the programme. The test results show whether the participant has changed in a pro-social or an anti-social direction.

Following the programme, the male participants serving prison sentences show pro-social improvement in all areas. The participants serving probationary sentences show improvement in four of the seven areas: sense of coherence, impulsiveness, attitudes towards the justice system and tolerance for crime. Women show improvement in three areas: impulsiveness, tolerance for crime and their level of criminal identification. These results refer only to participants who *completed* the programme. Those who failed to complete the programme were less pro-social prior to the start of the programme than those who followed it through to completion.

When the test results for the programme participants serving prison terms are compared with those of a control group of prison inmates, the empathy scores are consistently better among participants in the programme than among the control group. In addition, the programme participants' scores on attitudes towards the justice system and criminal identification have improved in a pro-social direction over the course of the programme in relation to the control group scores.

#### **CERTAIN GROUPS OF PARTICIPANTS RE-OFFEND TO A LESSER EXTENT THAN THE CONTROL GROUP**

The proportion of participants who went on to re-offend is somewhat lower than the same proportion among the control group, but the difference is not statistically significant, like the results from a large Canadian study (Robinson, 1995). There is a clear difference, on the other hand, between those who completed the programme (42%), and those who did not (58%).

Certain groups among the participants re-offend to a significantly lower degree than their respective controls. The method used for establishing the control group precludes, however, determining whether their lower level of re-offending is an effect of the programme or is a result of differences between the participants and the control group as regards motivation and personality characteristics (individuals with psychopathic traits are avoided when recruiting participants, for example). A randomised study would be required in order to specify the effects of the programme with certainty.

The groups of participants that clearly have a lower level of re-offending than their controls are those with nine to twenty previous convictions and those who have been convicted of violent offences. The pattern of lower levels of re-offending among these groups by comparison with their controls is the same both for those who have completed the programme and for those who did not, although the reoffending frequency is higher amongst those who did not see the programme through to completion.

#### **THE MAJORITY OF PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWED FELT THE PROGRAMME HAD DONE THEM A GREAT DEAL OF GOOD, OR AT LEAST SOME GOOD**

BRÅ interviewed 18 individuals who had participated in the programme at some point between 1995 and the year 2000. All but one had completed the programme. The interviewees could be divided into three equally large groups: participants who were sceptical about the programme, those who felt they had gained some good from the programme, and those who perceived themselves to have gained a great deal from the programme. Virtually all of those interviewed, including those who were critical of the programme, felt they had experienced positive social relations with the other participants in the programme and with the programme leaders.

In general the sceptics felt that the contents of the programme were fairly self-evident and didn't need to be taught. Those who experienced having gained from the programme reported for example that they were now able to talk calmly with the social services instead of reacting aggressively.

#### **PROGRAMME LEADERS AND OTHER STAFF ARE POSITIVE BUT POINT TO SHORTCOMINGS**

The questionnaires provided information on what the programme leaders and the remaining staff felt about whether conditions were conducive to delivering the programme in a satisfactory manner, about the way participants are chosen, the extent to which there is an exchange of information and cooperation with others in the participants' immediate environment and the leaders' and staff's general opinion of the programme. For the programme leaders, the best aspect of the programme was the support for the Cognitive Skills programme provided at both the local and the national level. However, they feel that there is a shortage of time, both for talking with the programme participants one-to-one and for reducing the burden of work both on themselves and their colleagues. The other staff point first and foremost to the fact that there are far too few temporary replacements to take the place of programme leaders in their ordinary tasks. The programme leaders within the probation service were less satisfied with conditions for delivering the programme than were their colleagues working with the programme in prisons.

#### **CHANGES PROPOSED BY BRÅ**

The evaluation shows that the programme produces good results in the short term as regards the shift in test scores in a pro-social direction. Re-offending levels are reduced for certain groups of participants, but whether this is due to the programme or to motivational or selection factors is impossible to say without conducting a randomised study. Over half of those interviewed recalled the programme in a positive light, and had later made use of what they learned. Staff are positive about the programme but perceive a number of shortcomings. BRÅ proposes that the Cognitive Skills programme continue to be delivered but that a number of changes be introduced so that:

- the admissions and recruitment process is reviewed and an assessment is made of the potential participants' risk for reoffending. The motivation of potential participants should also be measured.
- the programme leaders' chances of delivering the programme in a satisfactory manner are reviewed with regard to the availability of replacements, for example, and access to professional supervision.
- collaboration in relation to the programme and its participants is improved, in part through the provision of training for non-leadership staff in the content of the programme, and in part through the provision of improved support to participants in the programme outside of programme hours and after completion of the programme. Others in the immediate environment of the participants should be included in this collaboration.
- the programme continues to be followed up internally in order to guarantee that programme integrity remains stable over time. Internal evaluations should also be carried out to compare participants in the programme with individuals who have not participated.