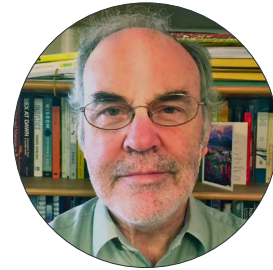


**RISK, NEED, AND RESPONSIVITY (RNR) WORKS**  
**A RESPONSE TO FAZEL AND FAVRIL'S (2024) SUMMARY OF THEIR**  
**REVIEW OF THE RNR MODEL**

Recently, *Probation Quarterly* (Issue 33) published a review of the *risk-needs-responsivity* (RNR) model of offender rehabilitation (Fazel & Favril, 2024) based on a paper published in the *Journal of Criminal Justice* (Fazel et al., 2024). In their *Probation Quarterly* paper, the authors conclude (p.12) that “Despite its widespread use in criminal justice and claims from experts, we found that the evidence base in support of the RNR model is mostly low quality and inconsistent”, and that “introducing RNR into new jurisdictions should not be recommended”, based on the available evidence. Having read both papers, we wish to critically examine their approach and conclusions, because the issues at stake may have wide-ranging influences and real-world repercussions. The points outlined here are informed by our commentary recently published in the *Journal of Experimental Criminology* (McGuire et al., 2025).

A careful reading of Fazel et al. (2024) shows that their review contains many errors and omissions, and misunderstands or misrepresents the RNR model. On the basis of this, Fazel & Favril (2024) present a markedly negative account of the RNR model and of reviews that support it. This could implant inappropriate doubt in the minds of busy practitioners who may have little time to become familiar with the research for themselves. To apply a familiar cliché: Ideas have consequences. In this case, ideas may be far-reaching, in relation to how the criminal justice system responds to individuals who have broken the law, and how they are processed through courts, probation services, or prisons.

The conclusions Fazel and Favril draw might significantly curtail the options that are presently available for those who have criminal convictions. Those conclusions could for example influence how Pre-Sentence Reports are written, and how individuals are understood, and therefore managed, in the criminal justice system.



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The services offered to them may alter according to what are thought to be the causes or drivers of their problems, particularly in relation to what is made available to them in attempting to bring about change (“rehabilitation”; i.e. reducing reoffending). To follow their recommendation to dispense with RNR would, we worry, leave the field with a vacuum in which practice is driven by individual interests, fads, and emerging ideas which are yet to meet a threshold for evidence-based practice. This is not, therefore, an academic or inconsequential pursuit, but one with potentially powerful resonance in the individual lives of those who are arraigned, tried, and convicted: and by extension for society as a whole.

### The Fazel et al. (2024) review

The RNR model by Bonta and Andrews (7th edition: 2024) contains a series of 18 principles, with three – risk, need and responsivity – being seen as the central components of the model. The “umbrella review” by Fazel et al. (2024) examined previous reviews that had used meta-analysis (a statistical method to integrate findings from individual studies) and systematic search methods to investigate the evidence for these three principles. Their umbrella review covered a 20-year period (January 2002 to December 2022) and included 26 meta-analyses and systematic reviews that were considered to provide evidence about RNR. They found 7 reviews of the risk principle, 6 of the need principle, 15 of the general responsivity principle, and 9 of the specific responsivity principle. Based on their measures of study quality they concluded that the evidence base is mostly poor quality and inconsistent (Fazel et al., 2024, p. 8).

### Misrepresentation

In carrying out their work however, Fazel et al. (2024) made some fundamental mistakes which we have addressed in our fuller (2025)

paper. It is first crucial to recognise that their review largely takes the RNR model out of the context from which it is derived, the *General Personality and Cognitive Social Learning* theory (GPCSL). This is important as RNR is a practical tool that is drawn from a more elaborate theoretical framework which has connections to other well-known theories in criminology. These include control, subcultural, strain, and differential association theories, and related concepts which Bonta and Andrews (2024) consider in their book. To examining RNR as a standalone set of principles without reference to that theoretical background is problematic, in that it makes it appear as if RNR is on its own: it is dealt with as if it is isolated, rather than having been built on decades of theoretical and empirical work.

### Review selection and distorted focus

A critical step in undertaking any kind of umbrella review is deciding which reviews are selected to be included or excluded. Decisions made about what is in and what is out will profoundly shape the conclusions that can be, and are drawn. Within the Fazel et al. (2024) review, several reviews were excluded on the basis that they were authored by those considered proponents of RNR. This was achieved by discarding reviews based on the authors rather than using the more robust method of statistically assessing whether reviews may be biased. In addition, a large number of reviews which support the RNR model were completely missed during their search because of the search terms they used. Whilst the Fazel et al. study included (initially) 26 meta-analyses, we counted 14 relevant reviews, all published during the 2002-2022 time-frame, and all supportive of RNR, that are not mentioned by Fazel et al.

Having gathered and summarised the research, the next step in an umbrella review is to interpret and draw conclusions from the evidence you have. However, this can be a highly subjective process.

In giving an account of the reviews they analysed, Fazel et al. repeatedly overstate negative conclusions. The majority of the aggregated effect sizes which they quote in their umbrella review provide positive support for RNR. For example, in the tables they present, they show a total of 32 effect sizes – statistical tests of levels of support (or otherwise) – regarding the risk, need, and responsivity principles. All of the 32 effect sizes they present are in favour of the three RNR principles, and 24 of those effect sizes indicate there was a statistically significant effect. For the *need* principle, the results Fazel et al. cite are in fact further tests of the *risk* principle (that interventions should be titrated to the level of risk of re-offending that someone poses). The needs principle is not adequately tested at all because the reviews did not focus on changeable criminogenic needs that can be addressed through treatment and supervision. For example, one of the reviews they include examines research on the Static-99R, an actuarial risk assessment tool comprised of items referring to perpetrator age, criminal history, and sexual victim characteristics. This is an invaluable tool for addressing the risk principle, but it is not possible to directly change any of these factors. On the *general responsivity* principle, 10 of the 14 reviews generate evidence supporting RNR, and all 9 of those on *specific responsivity* provide support for it. In contrast to their conclusions, their evidence provides support for the RNR principles framework, not a challenge to it.

### Combining multiple principles

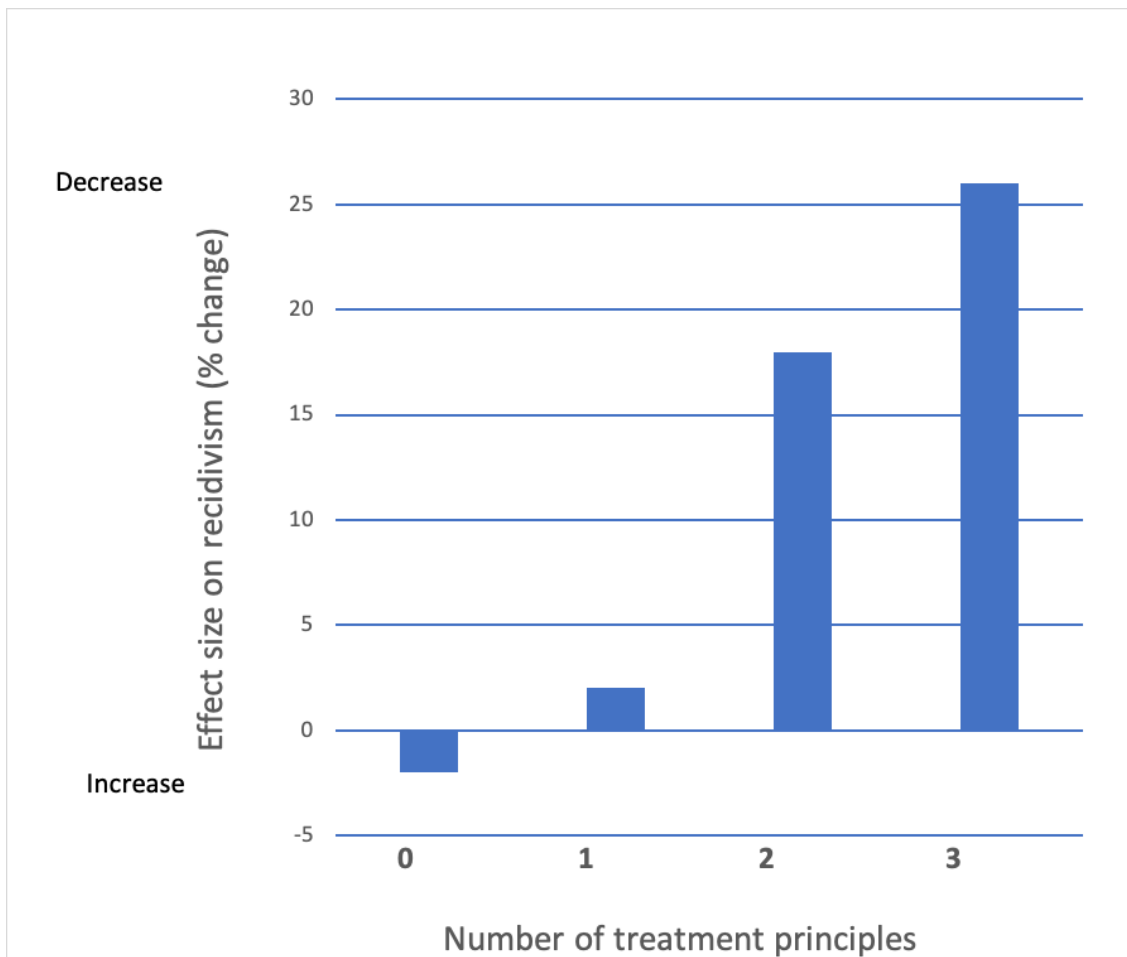
Perhaps the most important consideration is that the RNR model is founded on the basis that the best effects will be secured when all three principles are activated in combination. This means that looking at the principles individually provides a limited test of the

model. This has been shown by a previous summary of the evidence (see McGuire et al, 2025; Figure 1, which we reproduce here). When only one of the three “*treatment principles*” is applied, the effect on subsequent recidivism is comparatively low; when two are applied, it rises to over 15%, and when all three are applied, it exceeds 25%. Thus as we argue in our 2025 paper “...*the cumulative or synergistic effect of the principles operating together is a more appropriate test of the model*” (p. 6). A recent umbrella review found substantial support for the use of cognitive-behavioural methods, following RNR principles, in both custody and the community (Koehler and Lösel, 2025).

### Conclusion

We do not think the RNR model is perfect, or a comprehensive account of how to go about the work of criminal justice rehabilitation. No single model on its own is likely to achieve that goal, given the complexity of the people involved, the nature of the agencies responsible for implementing it, and the varied environments of service delivery.

We are not RNR developers and would welcome new models that can advance the work of preventing crime and encouraging desistance. We do nevertheless re-assert that the RNR model has a satisfactory evidence base, and certainly a more solid and highly evolved one than any other approach currently available. It is true that there are limitations and gaps in the evidence regarding the RNR framework, and we encourage more research on these topics. But it would be a serious mistake to follow Fazel et al.’s suggestion, cited earlier, to bypass RNR in search of an alternative. With respect to both academic and practice-based objectives, doing so would set our work back by many decades.



Mean effect size by adherence to RNR principles. Adapted from Bonta and Andrews (2024).

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