Innovations in a model for enhancing the behavior change content of supervision with community-based offenders

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Abstract

Routine supervision in the community represents a substantial opportunity to intervene with offenders and promote behavior change at the population level. In recent years Corrective Services New South Wales (NSW) has made a number of innovations to the community supervision model to enhance the behavior change focus and content of sessions between supervising officers and offenders. This has included introduction of the Practice Guide for Intervention (PGI), a series of structured exercises and activities that can be used in sessions to address offenders' criminogenic needs. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the PGI model as implemented by Corrective Services NSW. This paper also reports on the results of a number of studies evaluating components of the PGI, including system-wide uptake and ongoing delivery of the model; officers' perceptions of supervisory principles in the community; offender engagement in behavior change content; and implications for intervention dosage among the target offender population.

Introduction

Across international jurisdictions, a substantial proportion of offenders who enter the criminal justice system will be required to attend routine sessions of supervision in the community, either after exiting custody (parole) or as part of a community-based sentence (probation). For example, the Community Corrections division of Corrective Services NSW, Australia, received 25,705 new offenders for supervision and maintained an active average workload of 19,137 offenders over the 2017-18 financial year. Community supervision therefore represents a central point of contact and opportunity to intervene with offenders to address risk of recidivism at the population level.

Despite the potential impact of community supervision, this area of offender management has historically been under-researched and there has been limited evidence for principles of best practice in supervision structure or content. This has been associated with a lack of transparency and consistency in the 'black box' of supervision (Bonta, Rugge, Scott, Bourgon, & Yessine, 2008), and the proliferation of varying philosophies and methods including social work, psychotherapy, compliance, surveillance, intensive punishment-based supervision, and others (Pearson, McDougall, Kanaan, Bowles, & Torgerson, 2011). More systematic adoption of strictly enforcement-oriented approaches to supervision has been found to have minimal impacts on recidivism outcomes (e.g. Drake, Aos, & Miller, 2009).

However, recent years have witnessed innovations in the development of system-wide, evidence based supervision models that are aligned with Risk Need Responsivity (RNR: Andrews & Bonta, 2010) principles and emphasize the role of the supervising officer as an active agent in promoting behavior change (Gleicher, Manchak, & Cullen, 2013). For example, models such as Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision (STICS) and Effective Practices in Community Supervision (EPICS) train officers to identify dynamic risk factors in supervision sessions and apply cognitive behavioral and other delivery techniques to address those factors (Bonta et al., 2011; Bonta, Bourgon, Rugge, Gress, & Gutierrez, 2013; Labrecque, Smith, Schweitzer, & Thompson, 2013). In a more content-oriented approach, the Citizenship program from the United Kingdom links identification of risk factors in case planning to a set of modules that can be delivered to address needs relating to alcohol misuse, drug misuse, lifestyle and associates, relationships, and wellbeing (Bruce & Hollin, 2009; Pearson et al., 2011).

Following from these international examples, Corrective Services NSW has implemented a new model of community supervision named the Practice Guide for Intervention (PGI). The PGI comprises a structured series of exercises that are intended to increase the consistency and behavior change content of sessions with offenders. In the following sections we give an overview of the PGI model as implemented by Corrective Services NSW. We also report on insights gained from a series of evaluation studies on implementation of the PGI, relating to processes of system-wide uptake and ongoing delivery of the model; officers' perceptions of supervisory principles in the community; offender engagement in content; and implications for intervention reach and dosage among the target offender population.

The Practice Guide for Intervention

For several years NSW Community Corrections has maintained a supervision framework that is structured around RNR principles. For example, the Level of Service Inventory – Revised (LSI-R: Andrews & Bonta, 1995) was adopted by Corrective Services NSW from 2001, and NSW Community Corrections applies assessment results to inform case planning and prioritize intervention according to risk. An overarching purpose of the community supervision process has then been to provide case management that addresses identified risk factors for reoffending. However, there has historically been limited formal guidance about the substantive content of face to face supervision sessions between officers and individual offenders to support this aim.

In recognition of the absence of clear guidance about the content of supervision, both locally and across jurisdictions (e.g. Gleicher et al., 2013), Corrective Services NSW introduced the PGI model in 2016. The PGI is a content-oriented model comprising a series of 56 exercises across 13 modules (see Table 1) that can be applied to assist case formulation and deliver behavior change interventions during supervision sessions. The first module contains mandatory exercises that introduce offenders to supervision and support the case planning process. The remainder are optional and provide exercise content to promote change in a range of specified needs, in addition to addressing responsivity factors and providing continuity and reinforcement across sessions. In this regard the PGI is designed so that supervising officers can select individual modules and exercises as they pertain to offenders' needs, stage of supervision and responsiveness.

PGI exercises are detailed in a comprehensive User Guide that provides simple structured activities and guidance for delivery. Exercises in the User Guide are accompanied by background in terms of the aims and rationale for addressing associated needs; suggested activities and template worksheets that can be used in activities; and themes for reflection, discussion and follow-up. Exercises are intended to be flexible in their delivery and oriented towards understanding of and consistency in subject matter as opposed to format. For example, worksheets may be delivered as a written exercise, used as the basis of discussion, or excluded from the session, depending on the offender's responsivity factors and other considerations (see Thaler, Chong, Raudino, & Howard, 2019).

In addition to the User Guide, a second major innovation of the PGI model is the introduction of a statewide team of Practice Managers. Practice Managers operate as a permanent supervisory group that monitors officers' delivery of the PGI (both in sessions with offenders and during training exercises) and provides routine feedback and skills development.

The PGI was designed to complement existing community supervision practices that are aligned with RNR principles. Introductory assessment exercises correspond with completion of the LSI-R, so that determination of offenders' risk and needs is empirically supported. Only offenders with a medium or higher risk of reoffending are prioritized for PGI delivery, and the frequency of supervision sessions in which PGI exercises may be delivered varies according to offender risk.

In addition, the PGI can be used as a standalone intervention but is also designed to extend the dosage of other programs that are delivered by Corrective Services NSW. For example, the User Guide provides guidance on selection of PGI exercises that complement and reinforce offenders' progress in the EQUIPS suite of programs, which is a set of needs-based and offence-specific interventions that are delivered to closed groups of offenders by specialist programs staff over 20 sessions (for more detailed descriptions of EQUIPS see Howard & Chong, in preparation; Howard & van Doorn, 2018).

The PGI was implemented by NSW Community Corrections using a phased approach so that officers were given opportunities to become familiar with content and develop their skills and confidence in delivery. From June 2016 officers were provided with initial training

and introduction to the User Guide, and encouraged to apply exercises with offenders on a voluntary basis. Between January and May 2017 officers were required to deliver mandatory assessment exercises and encouraged to apply other modules. Since June 2017 the PGI has entered the full implementation phase, with mandatory requirements to deliver exercises to offenders of medium or higher risk and associated monitoring of performance indicators.

Officers' orientation towards behavior change in supervision

The following sections detail the results of a series of studies evaluating the PGI, which were conducted by the Corrections Research Evaluation and Statistics (CRES) unit of Corrective Services NSW. An initial area of inquiry was whether officers have perceptions of the aims and functions of community supervision that are aligned with the PGI. As previously mentioned, a range of different philosophies and orientations towards supervision have been identified among officers (e.g. Pearson et al., 2011), some of which may conflict with or influence responses to the behavior change function of the PGI model. Research has indicated that variation in officers' orientation towards supervision can influence how they apply interactional techniques with offenders in sessions (Ricks & Louden, 2015).

To address this question, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of NSW Community Corrections officers (n = 43) located across the state, during the period of implementation of the PGI (Tran, Thaler, Chong, & Howard, 2019). Officers were asked to discuss their perceptions of the critical aims and functions of supervising offenders in the community. We also asked officers to rate the perceived importance of rehabilitation (behavior change), compliance and social work functions.

The results of this study suggested that there was a consensus about the overarching aim of supervision in reducing reoffending, as well as widespread acceptance of the rehabilitation function in achieving that aim (see Figure 1). Ratings of the rehabilitation function were not significantly correlated with aspects of the officer's previous experience or training in supervision prior to introduction of the PGI. This suggests that acceptance of the rehabilitation function of supervision may have predated implementation of the PGI for many officers, in addition to being further promoted by the PGI itself.

Officers also tended to endorse the PGI as a key mechanism in delivering the rehabilitation function of supervision. However, only around half of the sample (56%) equated the rehabilitation function with their identification as an active agent of change with

offenders, whereas the remainder (44%) identified more traditional program brokerage roles in referring offenders to external interventions.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Officers' responses also indicated that the perceived importance of rehabilitation was not in conflict with the compliance function of supervision. Ratings of the importance of compliance monitoring were high on average, and officers made reference to rehabilitation and compliance as having complementary roles in sessions with offenders. This finding was of interest because it suggests that officers can adopt a collaborative and at-times therapeutic orientation towards offenders without undervaluing obligations to control offender behavior and enforce adherence to legal conditions (see also Howard, Tran, Thaler, & Chong, 2019). In contrast, officers tended to view the social welfare or social work function as relatively less important to supervision, and made reference to outsourcing related case management needs to external agencies.

In general, officers' orientations towards the various functions of supervision had limited associations with uptake of the PGI model, including their perceived confidence in delivering exercises; ratings of User Guide content and training; and self-identification with the agent of change role promoted by the PGI. There was a small negative correlation between ratings of the rehabilitation function of supervision and perceived utility of the written worksheets that guide exercise activities. This may reflect lower endorsement of structured written content for sessions, or preferences for more flexible service delivery, among those officers who have previous experience of or orientation towards delivering behavior change interventions with offenders in sessions.

Implementation of the PGI

The PGI represents a major shift in the model of community supervision delivered by NSW Community Corrections which necessitated a highly involved process of implementation, including development of extensive written exercise content and guidelines; training or retraining thousands of officers including newly inducted staff; phased implementation into business as usual practices; and introduction of resources for quality assurance and continuing professional development. In recognition of these challenges we conducted interviews with NSW Community Corrections staff across the state (n = 56) with a

focus on implementation issues including experiences of training in the model, continuous application of content, and avenues for improvement to best practice (Thaler et al., 2019).

The feedback received from officers indicated that a substantial benefit of the PGI relates to the content oriented format and development of manualized resources such as the User Guide. The User Guide was frequently described as an important reference for planning sessions (57%), and for general learning or skills development (54%) in promoting behavior change among offenders. A potential downside of this format was that introduction to the PGI tended to focus on written content and many staff were oriented primarily by reference to the User Guide and brief training centered around the User Guide. As a result officers often reported needs for more extensive practical training in delivering content, including therapeutic techniques such as cognitive behavioral therapy and motivational interviewing.

In a related finding, officers almost uniformly endorsed the ongoing support and skills development role of the statewide team of Practice Managers as a critical feature of the PGI model. On a 5-point Likert-type scale, the majority of officers (79%) gave the ongoing support of Practice Managers a rating of 4 or higher.

By the time of full implementation of the model, most officers (68%) reported using PGI exercises in all or almost all of their sessions with offenders. Officers showed substantial variability in how frequently they reported using different modules, with the most prevalent endorsement of exercises relating to achieving goals, managing stress and anger, and managing cravings (see also Chong, Raudino, Thaler, & Howard, 2017). Selection of exercises tended to be guided by the relevant needs or responsivity factors exhibited by the offender. However, officers also made reference to more functional considerations in exercise selection, including perceived quality of the written worksheets and personal familiarity with exercise content.

Officers tended to contextualize difficulties using the PGI in sessions to times where offenders were experiencing acute crises or breakdown of functioning in the community. Half (50%) of officers reported that PGI content was suitable for use in crises and may generally be applied to address such crises to some degree. The remainder expressed beliefs that the model could not be used (28%) or has limited applicability only under certain conditions (23%) in the case of a crisis.

In contrast, fewer officers used activity worksheets in all or almost all (44%) of sessions, and a substantial minority (28%) reported that they almost never used the worksheets. Officers often reported that they instead used written content as a guide for structuring sessions, in order to reduce the formality of sessions and manage responsivity issues. A small subset (25%) of officers further reported that they did not use any formal exercise content or activities directly, but rather as a general thematic guide for sessions. While officers' feedback is consistent with PGI policies that encourage flexible application of content, it raises interesting implications about definitions of model integrity and the potential for differential outcomes according to the fidelity or flexibility of exercise delivery.

Relationship quality in delivering the PGI

The quality of relationships between offenders and officers has been identified as a critical factor in correctional outcomes (Dowden & Andrews, 2004) and means of optimizing the behavior change impacts of community supervision (Gleicher et al., 2013). Agent of change models of supervision have similarly emphasized the importance of collaborative and respectful working relationships (e.g. Bonta et al., 2011). Unlike traditional therapeutic relationships, supervising officers must develop an appropriate balance of care and control functions to achieve positive outcomes with offenders in what has been termed the dual-role relationship (Skeem, Louden, Polaschek, & Camp, 2007; Kennealy, Skeem, Manchak, & Louden, 2012).

A recurring theme of our evaluations has been whether officers are able to implement the PGI model while maintaining positive dual-role relationships with offenders. Previous interview results (Tran et al., 2019) were promising by showing that officers often have complementary positive views of both rehabilitation and compliance functions of supervision. To assess dynamics of dual-role relationships further, we recruited 30 officers across the state to administer the Dual-Role Relationships Inventory – Revised (DRI-R: Skeem et al., 2007) to a subset of offenders under their supervision, concurrent to their active use of the PGI (Howard et al., 2019). Offenders were asked to voluntarily complete the DRI-R and given privacy and confidentiality to complete the test. This method generated valid data from a total of 103 offenders, at a response rate of 50.2%.

The results of this study showed that offenders gave almost uniformly positive ratings of the dual-role relationship with their supervising officer (Figure 2). This included high ratings of Trust (e.g. 'my supervisor is someone I trust') and Caring / Fairness (e.g. 'my

supervisor takes my needs into account'), in addition to appropriately low ratings of Toughness (e.g. 'I feel that my supervisor is looking to punish me').

<p style="text-align:center">FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE</p>

While offenders' responses on the DRI-R indicated that officers may be delivering the PGI in a manner that promotes quality dual-role relationships, additional analyses raised concerns about the validity of this conclusion. In particular, we attempted to isolate the influence of the officer on DRI-R scores from variation at the offender level by applying a novel multilevel modelling approach. Results indicated that non-significant proportions of variance in scores could be attributed to differences across officers. A potential explanation is that offenders' responses on the DRI-R were influenced by response biases. Following this study we are currently reviewing protocols for assessing the dual-role relationship between offenders and supervising officers.

Implications for delivery of behavior change interventions

At the system level, the PGI model confers advantages in the delivery of behavior change interventions relative to traditional, structured group offender programs. These include use of an existing, large group of decentralized facilitators (supervising officers) as opposed to specialist programs staff; negating logistic barriers to bringing together groups of offenders in a single location; and incorporating intervention into mandatory schedules of supervision. As a result the PGI may be expected to improve how many offenders receive intervention and the intensity of that intervention. In a more recent study (Howard & Chong, in preparation), we explored how patterns of PGI session delivery compare and interact with that of the existing frontline suite of EQUIPS offender programs, among target offenders who had a medium or higher risk of reoffending.

Results confirmed that the PGI model has potential to substantially increase delivery of behavior change interventions to offenders, relative to the EQUIPS program alone. Figure 3 shows that between January 2015 and May 2018 delivery of EQUIPS to target offenders remained relatively steady at an average of 1,745 sessions per month. By comparison, delivery of the PGI increased rapidly following initial introduction and averaged 4,176 behavior change sessions per month in the most recent year of measurement. Trends towards increasing delivery of PGI sessions appeared to correspond with progressive shifts in phase of implementation, and may have also been influenced by changes in staffing over time.

The high volume of session delivery afforded by the PGI model has implications for reach and dosage of intervention. For example, an average of 5% of sampled offenders received a session or more of EQUIPS in any given month prior to introduction of the PGI. A substantially larger proportion had access to the PGI, so that an average of 45.6% of the sample received some form of behavior change intervention per month in the current operational phase. In addition, offenders received an average of 11.9 sessions in the first 12 months of their supervision order when delivered through EQUIPS alone, which increased to an average of 33.2 sessions when engaged in the PGI as well as EQUIPS.

Delivery advantages of the PGI were also observed in the trajectories by which offenders received behavior change interventions over the course of supervision. Offenders who participated in both EQUIPS and PGI appeared to receive greater proportions of intervention dosage at earlier stages of their supervision on average (77.1% over six months) compared to those who participated in EQUIPS only (51.9%). While it is not surprising that interventions may be more quickly organized and administered within supervision sessions compared to structured group programs, the data suggest that the PGI may have particular utility in bridging service delivery gaps at critical early stages of the case management process and for offenders with shorter windows of opportunity for intervention.

We acknowledge that many officers would have intervened with offenders during supervision sessions to promote behavior change prior to introduction of the PGI, in which case the new model may largely represent a different method of structuring or recording such interventions. As a result the reported data are not intended to reflect absolute increases in intervention activity before and after implementation of the PGI. Rather, the results provide a novel quantitative illustration of the population-wide scope of intervention afforded by adopting behavior change models into the community supervision framework. By extension, such models are expected to have more pronounced effects on the overall intensity of intervention delivered to offenders in cases where officers are known to rarely incorporate behavior change content in supervision sessions or do so with low integrity.

Conclusions

The PGI represents a major innovation in the community supervision model practiced by Corrective Services NSW, by improving the system-wide consistency of sessions between

officers and offenders and promoting best practice principles of behavior change in session content. Evaluation studies have shown positive indications that officers are amenable to (or already assume) rehabilitative and behavior change functions of supervision aligned with the PGI. Consistent with this, the available data suggests that uptake of the model among officers has been widespread, potentially contributing to substantial increases in the delivery of behavior change interventions to target offenders in the community.

It appears that supervising officers have been able to implement the PGI while maintaining positive working relationships with offenders, and without neglecting the compliance function of supervision. This has important policy implications by addressing concerns that adopting an ostensibly therapeutic or rehabilitative model of supervision may undermine security- or control-oriented priorities and functions. These findings also suggest that the PGI is compatible with an emphasis on the value of quality dual-role relationships in optimizing offender outcomes (e.g. Kennealy et al., 2012; Skeem et al., 2007).

One clear benefit of the content-oriented framework of the PGI is that it provides extensive manualized resources to support session planning and skills development. However, an associated risk is that there may be overreliance on such content when introducing and providing training in the model. Delivery may therefore be supported by ongoing resources for skills development such as the Practice Managers team, in addition to complementary training in therapeutic or process components of session delivery. A related challenge is to define and foster the range of skills required for supervising officers to act as agents of change in sessions, potentially including training in motivational interviewing and other cognitive behavioral techniques (Thaler et al., 2019), while continuing to distinguish their roles from those of specialist therapeutic agents.

An additional challenge of system-wide behavior change models such as the PGI relates to variation in delivery across officers and offenders and how this might influence outcomes. While most officers were found to routinely use PGI exercise content, endorsement of the different exercises varied and many officers described relatively infrequent use of worksheets. Poor uptake of specific content due to officer preference may result in underservicing of critical offender needs. In addition, some officers appeared to adhere to content in the vaguest sense and used the PGI as a general thematic guide only. Flexibility in implementation can be an asset to responsive and nuanced delivery of

interventions; however the findings emphasize the importance of continued monitoring and skills development to ensure integrity to best practice.

Delivery of the PGI entails a substantial shift in activities and priorities during the limited time available with offenders in sessions, which may interact with other functions of supervision. We found that while social welfare concerns are a relatively low priority for officers in sessions, immediate crises in psychosocial functioning can disrupt delivery of the PGI. It may therefore be beneficial to complement implementation of such models with other resources for social support. Within Corrective Services NSW, introduction of the PGI has coincided with a series of funded partnerships with external agencies that provide supervised offenders support in accessing services related to accommodation, alcohol and other drugs, mental health, and other needs. A recent study found that one partnership, named the Initial Transitional Support (ITS) service, may provide a critical complementary function by stabilizing probationers in the community and reducing the risk of return to custody, thus allowing for continuity of primary interventions with the PGI and other programs (Morony, Wei, van Doorn, Howard, & Galouzis, in preparation).

The PGI model continues to be reviewed and refined over the course of implementation by NSW Community Corrections. This may be particularly important in the case of content-oriented behavior change models so that manual resources such as the User Guide reflect an increasing understanding of offenders' and officers' needs. In concert with this, an ongoing schedule of evaluation is planned, with studies of model effectiveness and influences of variation in dosage on recidivism outcomes underway. While the results of evaluation have been promising thus far, further study is needed to assess whether the PGI model achieves system-wide aims to promote behavior change and reduce reoffending among offenders undergoing supervision in the community.

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Table 1

List of modules in the PGI model

Number	Module content
1	Assessment and planning
2	Achieving goals
3	Dealing with setbacks
4	Managing stress and anger
5	Managing impulsivity
6	Managing environment
7	Managing cravings
8	Interpersonal relationships
9	Communication
10	Conflict resolution
11	Self awareness
12	Prosocial lifestyle
13	General skills

Figure 1

Officers' ratings of the perceived importance of the rehabilitation, compliance, and social work functions of community supervision
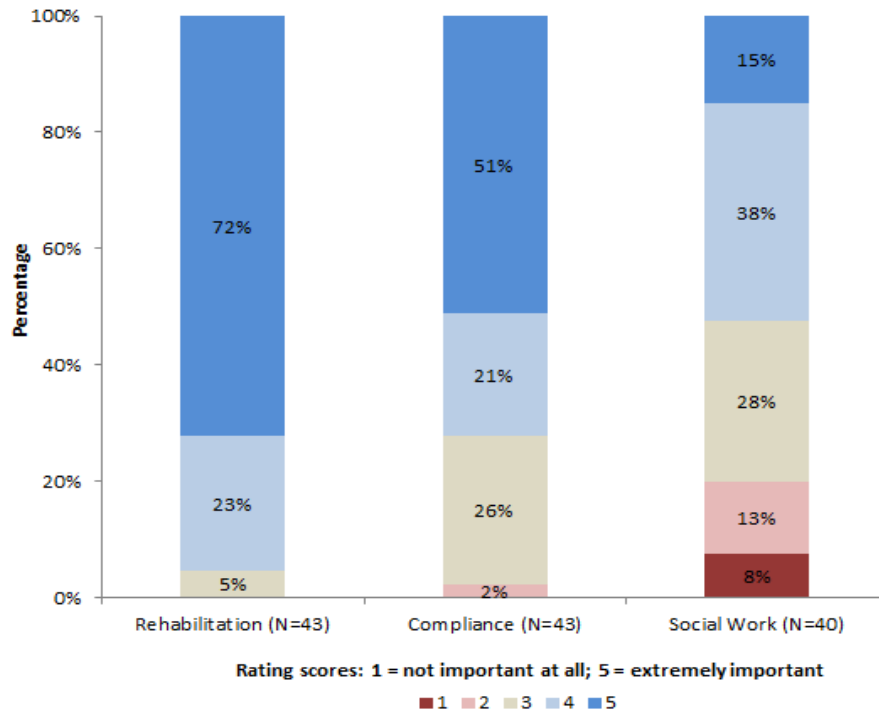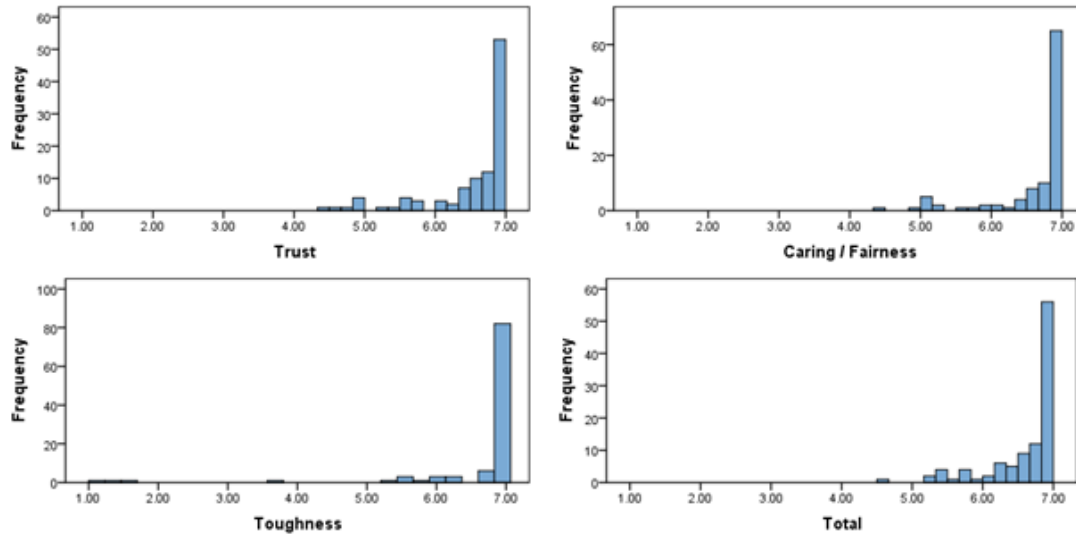
Figure 2

Distribution of average item–level ratings on factorial and total scores of the DRI-R.

*Note. Toughness scores have been reverse coded before graphing and calculating total score.

Figure 3

Counts of sessions of EQUIPS and PGI delivered to the target population by month