

Crime and Criminal Justice Research Programme

Serious Violent and Sexual Offenders: The use of risk assessment tools in Scotland

Gill McIvor And Hazel Kemshall

This report provides an audit of risk assessment instruments currently in use in Scotland with serious violent and sexual offenders, describes their use and assesses progress with the validation of risk assessment instruments for use in Scotland.

Main Findings

- Various approaches to risk assessment were being adopted by different professional groups working in different settings across Scotland.
- Psychologists were most likely to make use of specialist assessment tools that had been validated, though few tools had been validated for use with Scottish populations.
- Professionals expressed concern about the absence of risk assessment tools for use with young people, women and mentally disordered offenders.
- A primary consideration for all professional groups in their approach to risk assessment was the ability to make defensible decisions backed up by appropriate tools.
- Risk assessments variously informed risk management plans, helped inform multi-agency risk management strategies, assisted in the matching of offenders to interventions and aided recommendations regarding release/discharge/ sentencing in court.
- Different tools and approaches were perceived to have different strengths, but their ability to inform risk management plans was considered critical.
- Opinions were divided as to whether it was feasible or desirable to implement a common approach to risk assessment across different disciplinary groups, though a greater degree of consistency was considered desirable.

Introduction and Methods

The report of the MacLean Committee on serious violent and sexual offenders (Scottish Executive, 2000) identified a need for further research into risk assessment and recidivism in relation to this group. In response to the recommendations of the MacLean Committee the Scottish Executive commissioned research on risk assessment tools in use in Scotland. The aim of this research was to provide an audit of risk assessment instruments currently in use with serious violent and sexual offenders, to describe how they were being used and to assess how much progress had been made with the validation of risk assessment instruments for use in Scotland.

Two principle methods of data collection were employed in the study. The first consisted of a postal survey (audit) of tools and approaches being employed to assess risk among serious violent and sexual offenders in Scotland. This was supplemented by interviews with a range of professionals involved in risk assessment to explore in greater depth issues associated with risk assessment and management that had arisen from the audit.

Tools in use in Scotland

Various approaches to risk assessment were being adopted by different professional groups working in different settings across Scotland. Social workers were most likely to use tools developed to assess risk of recidivism amongst general offender populations while the police did not make use of standardised instruments in the risk assessments they undertook.

Psychologists – in prisons and in forensic health settings – were most likely to employ tools that had been developed to assess risk of sexual or violent offending (or close correlates thereof) and that had been validated, though only three of the tools they used had been validated against Scottish populations.

Tools in use had mostly been validated against or based on research evidence derived from adult male non-clinical populations. Particular populations for whom existing tools were considered largely inappropriate included young offenders (under 18 year of age), women and offenders with mental health problems.

Risk Assessment in Practice

Risk assessments were undertaken in a variety of contexts, including prisons community justice settings, secure and medium secure units and mental health in-patient and out-patient facilities. Risk assessments informed risk management plans, helped inform multi-agency risk management strategies, assisted in the matching of offenders to interventions and aided recommendations regarding release from prison, discharge from hospital or sentencing in court.

Various professionals were involved in the completion and interpretation of risk assessments. They had, in most cases, received training appropriate to this task and mechanisms appeared to be in place to quality assess the work.

Risk assessments were usually time-consuming and resource demanding and sometimes constrained by external time frames. Professional respondents also identified important gaps in the availability of information to inform risk assessments, including witness statements and court records.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Different Approaches to Risk Assessment

Tools had most often been adopted for use in risk assessments on account of the ease with which they could be administered and/or scored, their ability to identify risk of harm and their ability to identify the risk of sexual offending. Social workers were more likely to use tools that were relatively easy to administer while psychologists were attracted to tools that had been validated, particularly if normative data for Scotland were available. One specialist project had developed its own tool which, although it had not been validated, was being considered for national adoption by the police.

A primary consideration for all professional groups in their approach to risk assessment was the ability to make defensible decisions backed up by appropriate tools. Different tools and approaches were perceived to have different strengths, however their ability to inform risk management plans was considered critical. Weaknesses associated with different tools included their complexity, their lack of objectivity, their lack of validation and their inability to measure the specific risks associated with serious violent and sexual offenders.

Risk Management

Risk assessment was considered not to be an end in itself, but rather a means of informing risk management strategies and plans. Risk assessments did this in various ways, but most often by identifying risk factors to be reduced through programme provision and, particularly in the case of the police, helping determine the level of monitoring or surveillance required.

Those engaged in managing the risk presented by serious violent and sexual offenders usually drew upon a range of information from various sources, in addition to formal risk assessments, to develop and implement risk management plans.

Particular difficulties were identified regarding the transition of prisoners from prison to the community and in respect of the management of mentally disordered offenders in the community. The latter, it was suggested, was constrained by legislative provision that prevented appropriate steps from being taken in some circumstances in which an offender was assessed as presenting a significant risk

Multi-agency Risk Assessment and Management

There was a general recognition, among those who participated in the research, of the value of a multi-agency approach to risk assessment and, in particular, to risk management. However, the extent to which this occurred in practice was somewhat variable. Opinions were divided as to whether it was feasible or desirable to implement a common approach to risk assessment across different disciplinary groups, though a greater degree of consistency was considered desirable.

Multi-agency risk management operated in different ways and at different levels within various settings. The strengths of multi-agency approaches to risk management included the increased ability to tailor responses to the risks presented by an individual and the avoidance of a single agency being held accountable for any adverse outcomes. Effective multi-agency approaches could, however, be undermined by issues such as the failure to share relevant information and by the varied approaches adopted by different agencies towards risk assessments and their interpretation.

Conclusion

The study revealed wide variations in the approaches adopted to assessing risk among serious violent and sexual offenders by different professional groups. Even within agencies or professional groups different methods of risk assessment were evident, though there was evidence of a movement towards greater consistency within prisons and across Scottish police forces. Little use was being made of validated risk assessment tools outwith prison and health settings and concerns were expressed about the absence of tools for use with young people, women and mentally disordered offenders. The current situation undoubtedly detracts from the effectiveness of multi-agency risk assessments and may have adverse consequences for the effective management of offender risk.

There was clearly some interest among various professional groups in the development of a standard approach to risk assessment, though this was accompanied by a recognition that it was not something that might in practice be easily achieved. In the interim, however, there would be some merit in a movement towards the adoption of tools for assessing risk of serious violent or sexual offending based on their 'fitness for purpose'. This would be a constructive development because factors other than their validity and predictive ability have, until now, tended to inform which approaches to risk assessment are employed.

If you wish further copies of this Research Findings or have any enquiries about social research, please contact us at:

Scottish Executive Social Research
2J

Victoria Quay
EDINBURGH

EH6 6QQ

Tel: 0131 244 7560

Fax: 0131 244 7573

Email: socialresearch@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

Web site: www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch

If you wish a copy of "Serious Violent and Sexual Offenders: The use of risk assessment tools in Scotland", the report which is summarised in this Research Findings, please send a cheque for £5.00 made payable to The Stationery Office to:

The Stationery Office Bookshop

71 Lothian Road

EDINBURGH

EH3 9AZ

Tel: 0870 606 5566

Fax: 0870 606 5588

<http://www.tso.co.uk/bookshop>

This document (and other Research Findings and Reports) and information about social research in the Scottish Executive may be viewed on the Internet at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch>

The site carries up-to-date information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Scottish Executive. Subjects covered include transport, housing, social inclusion, rural affairs, children and young people, education, social work, community care, local government, civil justice, crime and criminal justice, regeneration, planning and womens issues. The site also allows access to information about the Scottish Household Survey.

I SBN 0 - 7559 - 3457 - 1

