

## INFORMATION SHEET 3

# Offender risk assessment

Implicit in any attempt to assess risk is the belief that some individuals pose less risk of offending than others. Risk assessments are typically based on the identification of risk factors, which include characteristics of individuals as well as aspects of their situation and environment. Formal risk assessment tools provide the basis for a structured and systematic approach to risk assessment. That is not, however, to say that professional judgment and knowledge of the individual are unimportant. Indeed, predicting whether someone will offend involves establishing which risk factors are relevant to the individual case and using this information to guide decision-making about risk management.

There are essentially three main approaches to risk assessment. These are the unstructured clinical, the actuarial, and the structured professional judgment (SPJ) approaches. Traditional unstructured clinical predictions of risk involve opinions about an individual's likelihood of re-offending based upon the practitioner's knowledge of that person. In contrast, the actuarial approach is purely mechanical and places individuals into a risk category based upon the presence or absence of a predetermined set of risk factors that usually have an empirically established relationship with the criminal behaviour in question. Finally, structured professional judgement approaches rely on the application of a structured risk assessment instrument to guide and focus the assessment. Assessors examine the risk factors contained within the instrument to determine their relevance to the individual being assessed before making a final risk rating and delineating treatment and management needs.

While there has been considerable, and at times heated, debate between practitioners and researchers about the value of each of these approaches, there is a broad consensus within the scientific community that purely clinical approaches to risk assessment are not only likely to be less accurate than actuarial or structured assessments, but also that they are considerably less reliable. As such, most experts and professional bodies advocate the use of actuarial or structured approaches to risk assessment. The Australian Psychological Society (2005), for example, in their Guidelines for Working with People who pose a High Risk of Harm to Others suggest that members working in contexts of increased risk will need to be informed about the structured and systematic assessment of risk.

## Conducting comprehensive offender risk assessments

While there is no substitute for formal training in risk assessment, the scholarly literature provides a number of guidelines for conducting comprehensive risk assessments:

1. Clarify the purpose of the assessment
2. Review relevant collateral information (where possible)
3. Use formal risk assessment tools (actuarial or SPJ) for both the type of offending and the time frame in question
4. Choose tools with demonstrated reliability and predictive validity
5. When using actuarial tools be aware of the likely base rate of recidivism and report results relative to this
6. Both static and dynamic (i.e., changeable) risk factors should be considered in multiple domains, including contextual variables
7. Risk assessments should be individualised. Formal tools ultimately need to be supplemented by the consideration of case-specific risk factors
8. Dichotomous risk opinions should be eschewed in favour of probabilistic reporting that outlines conditions and scenarios that may elevate risk
9. Risk assessments should guide risk management plans
10. Risk management is the amelioration of dynamic risk factors

## Further reading

Davis, M. R., & Ogloff, J. R. P. (2008). Key considerations and problems in assessing risk for violence. In D. Canter & R. Zukauskienė (Eds.), *Psychology and law: Bridging the gap* (pp. 191-210). Aldershot: Ashgate.

Eaves, D., Douglas, K. S., Webster, C. D., Ogloff, J. R. P., & Hart, S. D. (2000). *Dangerous and long-term offenders: An assessment guide*. Burnaby, BC: Mental Health, Law, & Policy Institute, Simon Fraser University.