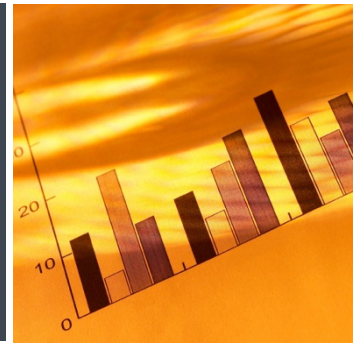


Offender Risk Assessment Practices Vary Across Canada



2017-S015

www.publicsafety.gc.ca

BUILDING A SAFE AND RESILIENT CANADA

What exactly does it mean when a correctional agency assesses an offender to be high risk?

Background

A number of offender risk assessment tools have been developed over the years to assist correctional practitioners in deciding the nature and intensity of correctional interventions. Broadly, these tools assess offenders on a variety of items related to reoffending (i.e., risk and need factors). Ultimately, these tools provide a measure of the individual's level of risk for engaging in future criminal activity and inform decisions surrounding sentencing, security classification, treatment, release, and the intensity of community supervision in efforts to match services and supervision strategies to the level of risk.

Although aligning service and supervision intensity with level of risk to reoffend sounds simple, the existence of multiple risk tools raises questions as to the equivalence of the risk classifications each produces. Each tool uses different definitions of 'low', 'medium', and 'high' risk and often classify offenders with a different number of risk categories (e.g., very low, low, medium, high, very high). It is unclear at the moment whether an offender identified as high risk by the tool used in one jurisdiction would also be identified as high risk in another jurisdiction using a different tool. Also, if the reoffending rate for "high risk" offenders on one tool is considerably lower than the reoffending rate for "high risk" offenders on another tool, should their correctional response be the same?

A cornerstone of our justice system is that offenders should be treated in a fair and equitable manner. The goal of this review was to determine the extent to which the procedures for assigning risk levels vary across Canadian correctional systems, and the potential of this variation to have real-life consequences for

offenders and public safety. In particular, we were interested in how risk and needs levels are defined, the extent to which there is consistency across jurisdictions, and the implications for offender rehabilitation and management.

Method

Using a semi-structured interview, a total of 20 professionals from provincial, territorial, and federal correctional agencies were asked about the risk assessment policies and practices in their jurisdictions, which instruments were used to assess risk in their adult offender population on a system-wide basis (i.e., as a general rule across their province/territory), how they understood the risk categories provided by the instruments, and how the risk categories were used to inform various decisions (e.g., release, supervision, or treatment-related decisions). In addition, normative data (i.e., reoffending rates and distribution of risk scores) for the risk tools were examined.

Findings

Risk assessment has become routine practice across Canadian correctional jurisdictions. All Canadian jurisdictions used a risk/need tool for general recidivism, most used sex crime specific tools, and a few used tools specific to intimate partner violence. In total, 20 different risk tools and/or specific versions are used across Canada.

There was considerable diversity in the names, number, and meaning of the risk category labels used, which would result in different correctional responses to the same individual based solely on the risk tool used in a specific jurisdiction. In addition, each tool had its own number of risk category labels and respective conventions for risk communication. Some

tools communicated risk across three categories, whereas others had five. Even tools with the same number of categories (e.g., three) use different descriptors to communicate the level of risk for offenders. For example, the expected rate of general reoffending for high-risk offenders is 54% on one risk assessment tool, whereas the expected reoffending rate of high risk offenders on a different tool ranges from 66% to 87%. For sexual offenders, the reoffending rates for the Moderate-High risk offender on one tool are approximately twice as high as the reoffending rates estimates on a different tool for the same risk level (26% - 34% compared to 11% - 15%).

In the last few years, consultations with researchers, managers, and practitioners in Canada and the United States have focussed on how best to align risk assessment practices with the common goals of effective corrections. Supported by Public Safety Canada and the Justice Center of the United States Council of State Governments, these consultations have resulted in a potential way forward to standardize risk communication in diverse correctional systems. Five universal risk levels for general risk tools have been proposed (Hanson, Bourgon et al., 2017) and also been applied to sexual offending risk (Hanson, Babchishin et al., 2017). These risk levels were designed to remind evaluators and decision-makers we are talking about the same people, regardless of the risk scale that is being used or the jurisdiction where offenders are serving their sentence. As a next step, we suggest that this common language of risk be used in Canada to increase consistency in how risk is being assessed and communicated.

Implications

1. Offender risk assessment tools are universally employed across Canadian correctional jurisdictions.
2. Offender risk is being assessed and communicated inconsistently across the country. The diversity of risk tools used makes it likely risk has different meanings based solely on the tool used. As a result, offenders with the same sentence and same likelihood of reoffending may be managed differently.

3. Standardizing the meaning of risk category labels across risk tools could facilitate offenders consistently receiving the most appropriate, fair and empirically-based correctional responses across Canada.

Source

Mugford, R., Bourgon, G., Hanson, R. K., & Coligado, M. (2017). Offender risk assessment practices vary across Canada (Research Report 2017-R015). Public Safety Canada: Ottawa, ON.

Additional Sources

Hanson, R. K., Babchishin, K. M., Helmus, L. M., Thornton, D., & Phenix, A. (2017b). Communicating the results of criterion referenced prediction measures: Risk categories for the Static-99R and Static-2002R sexual offender risk assessment tools. *Psychological Assessment, 29*, 582.

Hanson, R. K., Bourgon, & Tavarez, L. P. (2017b). A five-level risk and needs system: Maximizing assessment results in corrections through the development of a common language. Justice Centre: Washington, DC.

For more information on research at the Community Safety and Countering Crime Branch, Public Safety Canada, to get a copy of the full research report, or to be placed on our distribution list, please contact:

Research Division, Public Safety Canada
340 Laurier Avenue West
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0P8
PS.CSCCBResearch-RechercheSSCRC.SP@canada.ca

Research Summaries are produced for the Community Safety and Countering Crime Branch, Public Safety Canada. The summary herein reflects interpretations of the report authors' findings and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Public Safety Canada.