

# Sexual Offender Risk Assessment: Key Lessons on the State-of-the-Art

By Jerrod Brown & Jay P. Singh

In accordance with state and federal law as well as professional guidance from the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA), professionals working with sex offenders need to be familiar with evidence-based methods of assessing the likelihood of sex offender recidivism. But with dozens of articles published on this topic each year in over 130 academic journals, keeping up-to-date with this important literature can be a challenge. Much progress has been made in recent years in understanding “what works” in sex offender risk assessment, and numerous structured risk assessment tools have been introduced by teams across the globe to aid practitioners and policymakers in this effort. The aim of the present article is to present four fast facts that all professionals working with sex offenders should know about the current “state of the art”, and to encourage the seeking out of professional training and consultation related to this topic:

- 1) **Low Base Rate of Recidivism.** The prediction of sexual recidivism is particularly difficult compared to other forms of risk assessment, such as violence or general recidivism risk assessment, due to the markedly lower rate of sexual reoffending. Because of this, sex offender risk assessment tools benefit from greater sensitivity (i.e., most recidivists were judged to be at “high risk”) but are hampered by lower levels of specificity (i.e., most non-recidivists were not judged to be at “low risk”). Hence, risk assessment tools may be misclassifying a substantial portion of sex offenders as higher risk than they actually are. It has been argued that this overclassification of risk is a serious civil rights issue.
- 2) **Dominance of Actuarial Risk Assessment.** There are two dominant approaches to structured risk assessment used in the United States today. The first is referred to as actuarial assessment and involves the use of evidence-based risk and protective factors to produce a probabilistic estimate of recidivism risk within a prespecified period of time (e.g., “Mr. Johnson fits into a normative group where 75% of offenders went on to recidivate”). This approach rarely involves clinical judgment, making it an objective and transparent method of assessment. The second approach to risk assessment is referred to as structured professional judgment (SPJ) and involves the administering clinician making a categorical risk judgment (e.g., “Mr. Johnson is at moderate risk of recidivism.”) using his/her professional experience and consideration of theoretically- or evidence-based risk and protective factors. As SPJ instruments tend to take longer to administer and require comparatively more clinical expertise, the actuarial approach has become dominant in the United States criminal justice system.
- 3) **Lack of Randomized Controlled Trial Data.** There is currently no research evidence that the use of sex offender risk assessment tools – be they actuarial or SPJ – decreases rates of sexual recidivism. Such a conclusion could only be reached through a randomized controlled trial, in which randomly-selected sites serving similar populations would implement a sex offender risk assessment tool and others not. In addition, the matching of evidence-based interventions for recidivism risk reduction to identified risk and protective factors would need to be taken into consideration. In the related field of violence risk assessment, randomized controlled trial findings are mixed, with some studies having

found evidence in favor of tool use and others having found no evidence that the implementation and routine use of such instruments results in recidivism reduction. Current studies have simply established an association between risk assessment tools and sexual recidivism, but not causation.

- 4) **The Importance of Dynamic Factors.** Until recently, the item content included on commonly-used sex offender risk assessment tools was static in nature, limiting its usefulness in identifying rehabilitation targets. However, research conducted over the past decade has established the importance of dynamic, modifiable risk and protective factors in the recidivism risk assessment process. Incorporating both static and dynamic factors establishes both absolute as well as relative thresholds of risk and provides a more comprehensive formulation of the likelihood of sex offender recidivism. By collaborating with offenders in their risk formulation, practitioners may be better able to identify critical risk factors and key protective factors especially useful in recidivism risk reduction.

### **Biographies**

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