



SMART

Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking

SEX OFFENDER MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING INITIATIVE

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SOMAPI Report Highlights

Adult Sex Offender Risk Assessment

The purposes of risk assessment span the spectrum of the criminal justice system.

Sex offender risk assessment is conducted by criminal justice professionals in different venues for different purposes, including sentencing and criminal adjudications; assigning imprisonment levels and periods and/or community supervision; determining treatment settings and modalities; determining whether to notify community members of a registered sex offender's presence; and in civil commitment proceedings, during which assessment results are used to argue for and against indefinite confinement.

Empirically derived actuarial approaches are more accurate than unstructured professional judgment in assessing risk.

Approaches to risk assessment that use a weighted set of factors associated with risk are more accurate than a clinician's judgment. These actuarial instruments identify the presence or absence of each risk factor, then the factors are combined by a prescribed means to produce a risk estimate. This is the only risk assessment method that can be scored using a computerized algorithm or by minimally trained non-clinicians.

There is no single risk factor that best predicts recidivism and there is no single best risk assessment instrument.

Researchers have identified many factors associated with sex offenders' risk to reoffend. The strongest predictors of sexual recidivism are factors such as sexual interest in children, history of sexual offending, age of first sexual offending behavior and having committed different kinds of sexual offenses. Other factors associated with sexual offense recidivism include a lifestyle of instability and criminal behavior. However, none of these alone will predict risk of recidivism. There are also many different tools used by criminal justice professionals today to assess risk. Just as there is no single "best" risk factor to predict recidivism, research has yet to identify a single "best" risk assessment instrument.

Research has yet to identify a single "best" risk assessment instrument. Based on current knowledge, using science-based, actuarial methods to assess sex offender risk is advisable. Training and monitoring of evaluators is needed to ensure that risk assessment procedures and instruments are used appropriately and with integrity.

Risk assessment instruments that incorporate both static and dynamic risk factors are becoming more prevalent and serve a dual purpose.

The utility of static risk factors (unchangeable factors such as age at first offense and number of previous convictions) in predicting recidivism has been established in numerous studies, and empirically identified static risk factors are a primary component of several valid and reliable instruments used in the field today. Including certain dynamic risk factors — e.g., substance abuse, living situation, employment — increases assessment instrument accuracy. Risk assessment instruments that incorporate both static and dynamic risk factors help identify sex offenders' criminogenic needs (traits, characteristics or issues that contribute to an individual's criminal behavior) and thus have the potential added benefit of providing intervention targets.

Training and monitoring is needed to ensure that risk assessment results are accurate and used appropriately.

Many of the purely actuarial tools widely used today can be completed quickly and easily by trained personnel. The advent of automated actuarial tools conceptually allows even clerical workers to compute risk scores using these instruments. Nonetheless, it's important to provide ongoing training and monitoring of evaluators to ensure that risk assessment procedures and instruments are always used appropriately and with integrity.

The opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this summary are those of the authors and contributors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the SMART Office or the U.S. Department of Justice. For more information about SOMAPI and this topic, visit www.smart.gov/SOMAPI.