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Research Summary

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GIVING MEANING TO RISK FACTORS

Question: Why do risk factors predict recidivism?

Background: There has been considerable research identifying risk factors for re-offending. Risk factors, such as prior offences, substance abuse, and age are routinely used to make decisions concerning sentencing, the need for treatment and the suitability for conditional release.

Risk assessments typically consider a variety of risk factors organized into structured scales. Although these risk scales have acceptable predictive accuracy, most of the commonly used scales do not explain why a particular offender is at risk, nor what needs to be done to reduce that risk.

In order to address this problem, previous research has distinguished between static and dynamic risk factors. Static risk factors are features of the offenders' histories that predict recidivism but are not amenable to deliberate intervention, such as prior offences. In contrast, dynamic risk factors are potentially changeable factors, such as substance abuse and negative peer associations. Given that dynamic risk factors are considered responsible for the increased risk, they have also been called criminogenic needs (see Research Summary, Volume 2, no. 2).

The static/dynamic distinction has helped evaluators focus on potentially causal factors. It is relatively easy for decision-makers to understand how dynamic risk factors, such as substance abuse and negative attitudes toward authority, increase recidivism risk. There are many static risk factors, however, for which the relationship to recidivism is not clear. For example, the risk of sexual recidivism is higher among sexual offenders who have unrelated victims rather than related victims, or who commit non-contact sexual offences rather than offences that involve intercourse. Understanding why risk factors predict recidivism would help determine appropriate intervention and management strategies, and to evaluate changes in risk levels over time.

Method: A comprehensive literature review was conducted examining risk factors for male sexual offenders. For each set of risk factors, we searched for explanations as to why the characteristics should be related to increased sexual recidivism risk. These explanations were guided by offenders' own explanations for their own offending, and by commonly-accepted psychological research on the development and stability of personality characteristics.

Answer: Risk factors predict recidivism because they are markers for enduring, psychologically meaningful characteristics. For male sexual offenders, the propensities that are most strongly related to recidivism are deviant sexual interests, difficulties

forming intimate relationships with adults, and problems with general self-regulation.

The variables that are the best predictors of recidivism are those that best represent the underlying psychologically meaningful risk factors. The best measures of problematic propensities consider both static variables, such as offence history, as well as dynamic variables, such as negative attitudes toward authority. Static risk factors are good predictors when the underlying propensities are highly stable. In contrast, recent evaluations of dynamic risk factors are the preferred method of assessment when the underlying propensities are prone to change.

Policy Implications:

1. By understanding the significance of different risk markers, decision-makers can distinguish between risk factors that are causally related to increased risk and factors that are co-existing but do not directly contribute to criminal behaviour (e.g., number of tattoos, age). For example, even though advanced age is empirically related to reduced risk, chronological age is only important because it is associated with changes in meaningful risk factors, such as self-control and attitudes toward authority.

2. Evaluators should use methods that allow them to identify the psychologically meaningful factors related to recidivism risk. The most helpful evaluations explain why the offender is at risk (or not).

3. Researchers should identify the underlying constructs assessed by the existing risk tools, and create reliable and valid measures of the major risk factors for sexual and general recidivism. For example, it would be useful to have assessment tools that could accurately determine the extent to which the offenders' capacity for intimate/marital relationships, lifestyle instability or negative peer associations contribute to their overall recidivism risk.

Source: Mann, R.E., Hanson, R.K., & Thornton, D. (2010). Assessing risk for sexual recidivism: Some proposals on the nature of psychologically meaningful risk factors. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, 22,* 191-217.

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