



Beyond Punishment: Actuarial Risk Assessment

Sydney Institute of Criminology

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- 1. Risk assessment as a work practice for corrections staff**
- 2. Integrating risk assessment into correctional case management systems**
- 3. Training and staff development implications**



Victorian Intervention Screening Assessment Instrument – VISAT

- **Tier One instrument for prisons and CCS (intake and screening assessment)**
- **Modular design in the form of a structured interview**
Violence, sex offending, drug and alcohol, social integration etc
- **Risk category calculation using a static factors regression model**



Work practice study

- **Interviews with staff about issues and practices relating to assessment**
- **Mapping assessment processes and their relationship to other work practices in corrections**
- **Examination of data on risk and need assessments of Victorian prisoners**
- **Direct observation of risk assessment processes**



Findings from the work practice study

- **Considerable variability in patterns of use**
- **Use of “pattern matching” schemas**
- **Lack of confidence in assessment instrument**
- **Few formal feedback mechanisms about assessment outcomes**
- **A strong bias to over-classification of risk**
 - Making “safe” decisions
 - Ensuring that offenders receive interventions

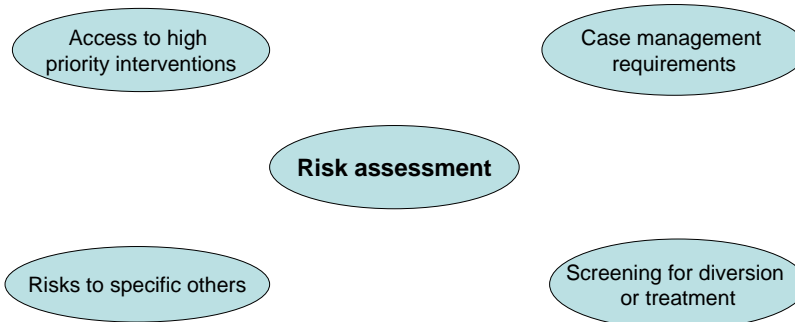


Concepts about risk

- **Variability in the meaning and implications of risk depending on job roles, professional background and experience**
- **Correctional agencies (and risk instruments) need to clearly communicate ideas and values about risk**
 - **How risk relates to other important issues like dangerousness**
 - **What constitutes low risk and how this should be managed**



Risk Assessment and Assessment Systems



THE EVOLUTION STARTS HERE



Specific versus general assessment

- Avoiding “decision overload” and excessive complexity
- Covering the critical decision elements

Assessment systems need to provide guidance about

- What decisions take priority under different circumstances?
- How discretion should be exercised?

THE EVOLUTION STARTS HERE



Corrections staff are case managers, not risk managers

- Fears about “de-skilling”
- Risk assessment needs to:
 - Relate to styles of professional practice and expertise
 - Provide clear guidance about decision criteria
- Increasing differentiation in service delivery
 - Assessment systems must facilitate communication of case management information



VISAT as a decision support system

- Able to use at a variety of skill levels (“Scripts” and guidelines)
- Scoring of individual modules and clear instructions about what actions should be taken
- Summary of assessment and criteria for program allocation



“Black swans”

- Career criminals (high static risk but low criminogenic needs)
- Late onset offenders (low static risk but high needs)
- Assessment systems need to encourage correctional staff to:
 - see offenders as individuals
 - Seek expert assistance when a problematic case comes along



Training and development challenges

- Learning risk assessment as part of skills development
- Supporting assessment systems with detailed written and analytical tools
- Establishing a cohort of skilled assessors to act as trainers and consultants (“Champions”)