Beyond Punishment: Actuarial Risk Assessment

Sydney Institute of Criminology

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Presentation outline

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
**VISAT design**

**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

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**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

- Access to high priority interventions
- Case management requirements
- Risk assessment
- Risks to specific others
- Screening for diversion or treatment

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?
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")