

# THE DYNAMIC SUPERVISION PROJECT: Improving the Community Supervision of Sex Offenders



By Andrew Harris and R. Karl Hanson

Community supervision and the management of sex offenders pose great concern to parole and probation officers, correctional administrators and the general public. This area, however, seems to create more questions than answers. Every day, many front-line supervision officers ask themselves things such as, “What should I be asking this sex offender who is now in my office? How are these answers related to risk? Just how much risk am I handling here? What are this offender’s treatment and supervision needs? How do I communicate these risk and need levels to my correctional administration?” The Dynamic Supervision Project provides front-line parole and probation officers the tools to answer these questions.

Good community supervision of sex offenders improves community safety and reduces recidivism. That being said, supervision can only reduce recidivism risk when it monitors and addresses factors related to recidivism.

## Risk Assessment

The foundation of actuarial risk-assessment methodology involves the use of static, historical risk factors, such as length of the offender’s criminal record and victim preferences, to estimate long-term recidivism potential. Currently, a number of acceptable risk-assessment instruments using static predictors are available. These static instruments produce reasonable long-term recidivism estimates but, due to their static nature, are not sensitive to changes in risk levels over time, nor can they guide the officer or administrator as to when to intervene. To measure change, evaluators require knowledge of dynamic (changeable) risk factors. There are two types of dynamic factors: stable and acute. Stable dynamic factors represent skill deficits or entrenched attitudes that endure for months or years, such as poor cognitive problem-solving skills and intimacy deficits. Acute dynamic factors are transient states or situations that can change over a period of days or hours and signal the timing of new offenses, including drunkenness

and sexual preoccupations. These acute dynamic factors cue the supervising officers when to intervene to prevent imminent relapse or re-offense.

The Hanson and Bussière meta-analysis<sup>1</sup> summarized those risk factors most closely related to sexual recidivism. From this starting point, the authors of this article began the Dynamic Predictors Project, a retrospective file-review and interview study, in 1997. Extensive file reviews were conducted on 208 sexual recidivists and 201 offenders who had not recidivated with another sexual offense while on community supervision. In addition, the officers who were supervising these offenders were interviewed to determine what risk factors they had observed changing in the sex offenders just before they re-offended. Experienced parole and probation officers detailed the factors in the offenders’ lives they saw getting worse during the last three or four months of supervision prior to sexual re-offense. These officers also told the researchers what they saw going wrong with their offenders during their last visit, just before the offenders re-offended. These factors were then compared to a comparison group of offenders who had not re-offended during a matched time period. This study produced the two lists of risk factors represented in the SONAR assessment.<sup>2</sup> This assessment includes five stable dynamic items and four acute dynamic items. This study was, however, retrospective, relying heavily on the officers’ memory of events. This flaw prompted the need for a truly prospective study.

The present study, the Dynamic Supervision Project, involves the repeated assessment of more than 1,000 sex offenders under community supervision who have a sexual offense involving a child or nonconsenting adult. A large number of offenders is required as new sexual offenses are relatively rare (approximately 10 percent after two years).<sup>3</sup> Presently, there are 16 participating jurisdictions including all 10 Canadian provinces, all three Canadian territories, Correctional Service Canada, and Alaska and Iowa.<sup>4</sup>

## The Process

In each participating jurisdiction, probation and parole officers attend a two-day training course provided by the Department of the Solicitor General Canada on the static, stable and acute assessment of sex offenders. Standardized teaching modules, slide presentations and take-away binders containing all the course materials are used to ensure uniformity and consistency of training across jurisdictions. Upon completion of this training, officers are asked to enter each subsequent sex offender assigned to their caseload into the project. Consequently, the distribution of types of sex offenders (i.e., rapists, child molesters, exhibitionists) should approximate the natural distribution in the respective settings.

During the first meeting or two between the officer and the offender, the officer completes the Static-99 Assessment,<sup>5</sup> which asks:

- The age of the offender;
- Whether the offender ever lived with an intimate partner for two years;
- Whether the offender was convicted of a nonsexual violent offense at the same time he or she was convicted of the index offense;
- Whether the offender was convicted of a nonsexual violent offense prior to the index offense;
- The offender's prior sexual offenses;
  
- The offender's convictions for noncontact sexual offenses;
- The number of prior sentencing dates;
- Whether there were any victims of sexual assaults outside the family;
- Whether there were any stranger victims of sexual assaults; and
- Whether there were any male victims of sexual assaults.

In the following two or three meetings, the officer completes the Stable Dynamic Assessment.<sup>6</sup> This guided interview process takes slightly more than an hour for an experienced officer, provides suggested questions for each area of the assessment, and allows the officer to assess six major areas of stable risk in the offender, four of which have subsections. They are:

- Significant social influences;
- Intimacy deficits: Lovers/intimate partners, emotional identification with children, hostility toward women, general social rejection/loneliness and lack of concern for others;
- Sexual self-regulation: Sex drive/preoccupation, sex as coping and deviant sexual interests;
- Attitudes supportive of sexual assault: Sexual entitlement, rape attitudes and child molester attitudes;
- Cooperation with supervision; and
  
- General self-regulation: Impulsive acts, poor cognitive problem-solving skills and negative emotionality/hostility.

The stable assessment is re-administered every six months throughout the supervision period, allowing officers to monitor the most important risk factors and treatment targets for each individual offender. Repeated stable assessment of the same offender population allows both the officers and correctional administrators to see which offenders are becoming less risky and which are becoming more risky over time. Most important, it allows the jurisdiction to assign offenders to different treatment and supervision options based on their needs.

At each subsequent supervisory meeting, officers assess seven areas of acute dynamic risk: access to victims, emotional collapse, collapse of social supports, hostility, substance abuse, sexual preoccupations and rejection of supervision. These items take five to 10 minutes to complete (perhaps longer if the offender is presenting serious problems). Once again, a manual of suggested questions is presented to the officers during their training to help them assess these acute factors.

This project uses "faxable" paper forms to collect data, and acute data may also be submitted through an Internet portal employing "point and click" technology. These methods reduce data entry errors and result in reduced personnel costs. To maintain confidentiality, a system of unique identifiers (known only to the principle investigators) is used to identify offenders and officers.

## Results So Far

Presently, there have been 638 static assessments entered into the computer with an average Static-99 risk score of 2.89 (SD 1.93). The Static-99 risk profile for the whole sample can be seen in Figure 1.

This analysis shows approximately 26 percent of offenders scoring in the low static risk category (9 percent projected recidivism risk over 10 years), 42 percent of offenders scoring in the low-moderate static risk category (13.5 percent projected recidivism risk over 10 years), 22 percent of offenders scoring in the moderate-high static risk category (34.5 percent projected recidivism risk over 10 years) and 10 percent of offenders scoring in the high static risk category (45 percent projected recidivism risk over 10 years).

The scores of the 500 stable assessments in the computer so far appear to form a normal curve (see Figure 2) with about 42 percent of offenders falling into the low stable risk category, about 46 percent of offenders falling into the moderate stable risk category and about 12 percent of offenders falling into the high stable risk category. At this time, stable risk profiles are not associated with specific recidivism percentages.

The stable analysis does, however, allow users of this assessment methodology to determine the most likely treatment objectives for the whole sample and for each jurisdiction. The four stable dynamic risk factors presenting the most difficulties for the offenders presently registered with the project are: lovers and intimate partners, poor cognitive problem-solving skills, general social rejection/loneliness, and impulsive acts. These factors are the most important treatment targets for this group of offenders. Both static and stable risk levels are reported in writ-



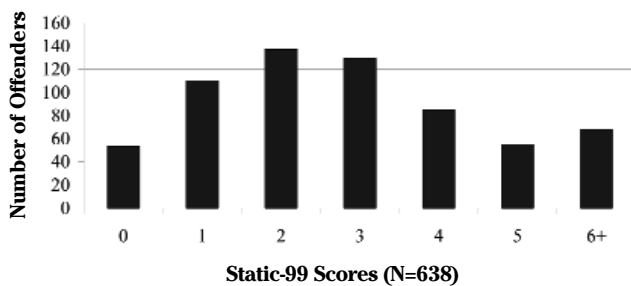


ing to each participating jurisdiction every six months and these interim project reports provide the jurisdiction with the ability to aim its treatment and supervision resources where they will do the most good — at the highest risk offenders.<sup>7</sup>

For the Dynamic Supervision Project, the outcome criteria are: a new sexual offense, a new violent offense, any new offense, a sex-related breach of supervision (e.g., a child molester in a playground), and any breach of supervision. Information concerning new offenses and breaches of conditions are generally reported by the supervising officers to the project office. To date, 11 sexual recidivists, 10 nonsexual violent recidivists, seven nonviolent “other” recidivists, four sex-related breaches of supervision and 24 offenders with nonsexual breaches of supervision have been identified. At project completion, the centralized criminal history records maintained by police and the courts will be searched. Analyses will compare the recidivists and nonrecidivists on all static, stable and acute risk factors assessed in this study. Once an efficient set of predictor variables has been identified, tables will be created that provide recidivism probabilities based on variable combinations of static, stable and acute factors. Such tables should help officers and correctional administrators prioritize their cases and determine when interventions are most needed.

This research must address two inherent challenges. The first is that the low base rate of sexual re-offending means that large numbers of offenders must be followed over extended follow-up periods. As the follow-up period increases, so does the need for training updates (to limit rater drift) and the need for offenders to make smooth transitions between officers as officers are reassigned or offenders move. Second, it is hoped that there is an experimenter effect. Officers using this assessment protocol should have a better ability to detect and respond to risky situations in a more informed and timely manner. By improving community supervision, the offenders in the

**Figure 1. Dynamic Supervision Project: Static-99 Total Scores**



project should recidivate at an even lower rate than those being supervised using less-structured procedures. As a result, it is hoped that officers participating in the project will be able to improve public safety while advancing correctional knowledge.

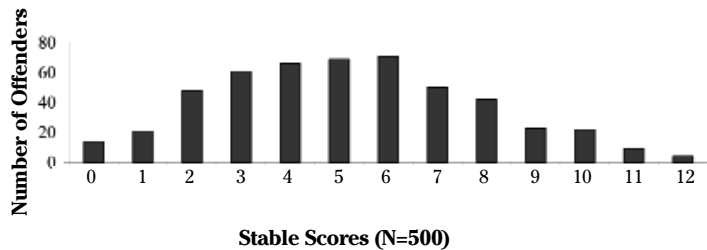
**ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Hanson, R.K. and M.T. Bussière. 1998. Predicting relapse: A meta-analysis of sexual offender recidivism studies. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 66(2):348-362.

<sup>2</sup> Hanson, R.K. and A.J.R. Harris. 2001. A structured approach to evaluating change among sexual offenders. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 13(2):105-122.

<sup>3</sup> Hanson, R.K. and D. Thornton. 2000. Improving risk assessments for sex offenders: A comparison of three actuarial scales. *Law and Human Behavior*, 24(1):119-136.

**Figure 2. Dynamic Supervision Project: Stable Total Scores**



<sup>4</sup> The project contact for Iowa is Randy Cole, polygraph examiner, Sixth Judicial District Department of Correctional Services, State of Iowa; (319) 398-3675, ext. 1145; randy.cole@doc.state.ia.us.

<sup>5</sup> Documents noted in this article can be downloaded from the Internet at [www.sgc.gc.ca](http://www.sgc.gc.ca). To access the information, make a language choice, click on “Corrections,” click on “Corrections Reports” and click on the appropriate year on the bookshelf. For the basic Static-99 document, click on “1999”; for the new Coding Manual for the Static-99, click on “2003.”

<sup>6</sup> Hanson, R.K. and D. Thornton. 1999. *STATIC-99: Improving actuarial risk assessments for sex offenders*. (User report 1999-2000). Ottawa: Department of the Solicitor General Canada.

To obtain all forms and coding manuals free of charge by e-mail, contact the authors at [harrisa@sgc.gc.ca](mailto:harrisa@sgc.gc.ca).

<sup>7</sup> Andrews, D.A. and J.L. Bonta. 2003. *The psychology of criminal conduct, third edition*. Cincinnati: Anderson Publishing.

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