

ACA Research Council Sponsors Author-Meets-Critic Session

By Ralph Serin

The corrections field is at a crossroads as it struggles with fiscal pressures and the need for informed resource allocation to ensure the use of cost-efficient and cost-effective strategies. During the past three decades, the field has moved from using relatively unstructured risk assessment to implementing more systematic and empirically validated approaches that inform case management both in prisons and in the community. Ideally, correctional systems should use a model that borrows from each of these approaches and allows for the sharing and integration of key case management information in decision-making.

In February 2009, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) issued a special report titled “*A Question of Evidence: A Critique of Risk Assessment Models Used in the Justice System*.”¹ Its author, Christopher Baird, is the executive vice president of NCCD. The report raises a number of important issues regarding contemporary risk assessment approaches and, in the process, sparks a flurry of debate. As it has done in the past with other noteworthy and controversial reports, ACA’s Research Council sponsored an author-meets-critic session to provide a forum for discussion. The session took place at the 2010 ACA Winter Conference in Tampa. I was the “critic” to Baird and, at the request of the National Institute of Corrections, which provided financial support for the session, I wrote a report that expounds on my remarks in Tampa and draws from my comments below.

A major premise of the NCCD report is that the predictive accuracy of risk scales can be enhanced by addressing the key aspects of scale development more rigorously. Scale items (both static and dynamic) vary in predictive validity, but it is well-known that knowledge of only a small number of criminal history and demographic variables can yield modest to good predictive accuracy. The NCCD report argues that risk assessment accuracy diminishes when too many risk and need items are calculated in the same instrument and that increasing the number of items in a risk scale is problematic because all the items are not equally predictive. However, many agencies use risk assessment both to assign risk levels (e.g., for classification) and to develop program plans; so, a combined scale has appeal. Unfortunately, a recent meta-analytic review of risk scales shows no marked difference among scales used commonly in correctional and forensic assessment. Thus, combining the scales does not strengthen them or make them any more effective.²

The NCCD report also challenges the definition of “criminogenic,” asserting that, at a case level, many factors (e.g., self-esteem) could cause criminality. But this

seems to contradict the consistent findings from meta-analytic research that there are essentially seven or eight major criminogenic domains. While it is possible to describe a case for which self-esteem is a credible factor, making it part of formal programming will surely erode the gains made in terms of the development of the theory of offending behavior and the cost-effectiveness of correctional programs. This is not to say that the field should be closed to new understanding about antecedents to criminal behavior, because new domains, such as trauma and mental health symptoms for female offenders, are emerging.³

The report also notes the need to be more judicious in applying the term “protective factor,” because not doing so may raise false expectations. Crime desistance, which has been described in the research literature for more than two decades, is gaining popularity as researchers increase their efforts to describe and measure constructs underlying offenders’ transition to successful reentry. Because of this, increased specificity is required, particularly in the area of protective factors, which inform the crime desistance process. As the report correctly notes, protective factors are not simply the absence of risk factors, and it is the field’s obsession with risk assessment that has obscured its understanding of offender success.⁴

Lastly, the report asserts that risk scales should not be used to measure treatment performance because risk factors do not imply causation, and any change in offenders’ scores on such instruments, presumably due to their involvement in programming, would not reflect changes in risk level. If risk scales do not incorporate constructs relevant to offender change, then change scores should be invalid for reflecting risk reduction (a recent effort to demonstrate the predictive validity of intra-individual change [pre/posttreatment change scores] was disappointing⁵). This further emphasizes the need to better understand the offender change process as it relates to risk reduction.

One advance that could come from these discussions may be the development of a more clearly articulated model of risk assessment that distinguishes the relative contribution of both static and dynamic factors. Static factors provide information that attempts to predict *who* will fail, whereas dynamic factors attempt to provide greater clarity about *when* an at-risk individual will fail. Recent work by Skeem and Douglas and the work of Hanson and colleagues describe more elegant aspects of dynamic risk, such as risk state versus risk status and stable factors versus acute factors.⁶ As such, the issue of whether risk scales should incorporate dynamic factors may not simply be an empirical issue regarding overall accuracy, although this

appears to be the NCCD report's position. Indeed, perhaps the time is ripe for a public domain risk assessment instrument. In the meantime, agencies will continue to struggle with the right choice, and vendors will continue to emphasize the advantages of their particular scale. The key is for agencies to select and implement assessment approaches that best inform the needs for case management and decision-making appropriate for their own staff and offender populations.

ENDNOTES

¹ Baird, Christopher. 2009. *A question of evidence: A critique of risk assessment models used in the justice system*. Oakland, Calif.: National Council on Crime and Delinquency (February). Available at http://nccd-crc.issuelab.org/research/listing/question_of_evidence_a_critique_of_risk_assessment_models_used_in_the_justice_system_a.

² Campbell, Mary Ann, Sheila French and Paul Gendreau. 2009. The prediction of violence in adult offenders: A meta-analytic comparison of instruments and methods of assessment. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 36:567-590.

³ Blanchette, Kelley and Shelley L. Brown. 2006. *The assessment and treatment of women offenders: An integrative perspective*. Wiley Series in Forensic Clinical Psychology. Chichester, England: Wiley.

Van Voorhis, Patricia, Emily M. Wright, Emily Salisbury and Ashley Bauman. 2010. Women's risk factors and their contributions to existing risk/needs assessment: The current status of a gender-responsive supplement. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 37(3):261-288. DOI: 10.1177/0093854809357442

⁴ Kosterman, Rick, J. David Hawkins, Robert D. Abbott, Karl G. Hill, Todd I. Herrenkohl and Richard F. Catalano. 2005. Measures of positive adult behavior and their relationship to crime and substance use. *Prevention Science*, 6(1):21-33.

⁵ Serin, Ralph C., C.D. Lloyd, L. Helmus, D. Derkzen and D. Luong. (in press). *Assessment and Conceptual Issues in Understanding Offender Change*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections.

⁶ Douglas, Kevin S. and Jennifer L. Skeem. 2005. Violence risk assessment: Getting specific about being dynamic. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 11:347-383.

Hanson, R.K., A.J.R. Harris, T. Scott and L. Helmus. 2007. *Assessing the risk of sexual offenders on community supervision: The Dynamic Supervision Project* (User Report No 2007-05). Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Corrections Research, Public Safety Canada.

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