



Sex offender risk assessment: A reexamination of the coffee can study



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ABSTRACT

There exists a valid concern among forensic psychology scholars that measures intended for sexual offenders have plateaued in their predictive accuracy. The current study examined this concern using the “coffee can” methodology of Kroner, Mills, and Reddon (2005). The Iowa Sex Offender Risk Assessment (ISORA8), Level of Service Inventory – Revised (LSI-R), and Static-99R were used to predict various methods of detected recidivism (general, sexual, and violent recidivism) as compared to three randomly generated measures and a weighted generated measure. Independent correlation and receiver operating characteristic comparisons found that in almost all cases, generated measures outperformed established measures. Analyses indicated that the current conceptualization of risk for sexual offenders has not been thoroughly integrated into established measures. Current measures appear incomplete, but have a clear and empirically-noted ability to improve.

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1. Introduction

The field of risk assessment is one of the most critical areas of forensic practice. Given its impact on offenders, victims, and society as a whole (Kemshall, 2001), risk assessment has been the subject of an enormous amount of research over the last several decades. Initial commentaries largely criticized risk assessment as likely to be wrong as right (Monahan, 1981), though later studies also indicated that empirically based approaches (i.e., actuarial and structured) were more successful than purely clinical efforts (Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Singh & Fazel, 2010). Gradually, structured and actuarial approaches were developed as a result of a vastly expanding research base (Kroner et al., 2005) and subsequently gained popularity among mental health professionals (Archer, Buffington-Vollum, Stredny, & Handel, 2006). The lack of universal acceptance to adopt these instruments over the last several decades (Oleson, VanBenschoten, Robinson, & Lowenkamp, 2011) is surprising given Grove and Meehl's (1996) statement about statistical approaches compared to clinical approaches in general: “we know of no social science controversy for which the empirical studies are so numerous, varied, and consistent as [the superiority of statistical assessments]” (p. 318).

Originally, the majority of actuarial measures were designed to assess for general recidivism (Bonta, 1996). However, recommendations for further actuarial measures spurred the creation of more narrowly-focused risk instruments. Recidivism among sex offenders,

for example, was one of the most examined fields of risk assessment throughout the late 1990s (Hanson & Thornton, 2000). Some of the most popular measures produced during this time were the Sex Offender Risk Appraisal Guide (SORAG; Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1998), Rapid Risk Assessment for Sex Offense Recidivism (RRASOR; Hanson, 1997), and the Minnesota Sex Offender Screening Tool – Revised (MnSOST-R; Epperson, Kaul, Huot, Goldman, & Alexander, 2004).

Studies examining these new measures were highly prevalent throughout the early 2000s; an Academic Search Premier query for variations on “sexual risk assessment measure” returned 122 peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2005. Yet while most of these instruments were frequently refined, most failed to predict sexual recidivism more successfully than measures intended for general recidivism. In a meta-analysis of 118 recidivism studies, Hanson and Morton-Bourgon (2009) found that although actuarial sexual recidivism measures were most successful at predicting sexual offending risk ($d = 0.67$), actuarial general recidivism instruments were not far behind ($d = 0.62$). Further, a meta-review by Singh and Fazel (2010) reported that six of seven meta-analyses found the type of reoffense intended to be predicted by risk assessments did not moderate effect sizes. Such an observation has been a rather common finding in the literature. Even the Psychopathy Checklist – Revised (PCL-R), which is intended to assess psychopathy, has been successful in predicting violent and general recidivism (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004, 2005; Singh & Fazel, 2010), although there still exists considerable variation among scales in their ability to predict violence (Singh, Grann, & Fazel, 2011). Nonetheless, there exists a valid concern among forensic psychology scholars that most measures contribute little distinct insight into the task of assessing risk, so much so that some

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instruments have been used to assess behaviors they were not originally intended to examine (Hemphill & Hare, 2004).

One unique study examining this concern was published by Kroner et al. (2005). In their “coffee can study,” Kroner and colleagues examined the predictive accuracy of four instruments generated or randomly selected from a pool of items from the PCL-R, Level of Service Inventory – Revised (LSI-R), Violence Risk Appraisal Guide (VRAG), and General Statistical Information of Recidivism (GSIR) scale. Researchers found that none of the standard, well-validated measures were more successful at predicting post-release failure than the generated instruments. Kroner et al. (2005) offered “two conclusions: (a) the [standard] instruments are only measuring criminal risk, and (b) no single instrument has captured sufficient risk assessment theory to result in better prediction than randomly derived instruments measuring criminal risk” (p. 369). In essence, all general risk assessment measures appear to attend to the same simple, basic and robust factors. Skeem and Monahan (2011) even more recently speculated that general risk assessment reached a ceiling and that further research should move away from prediction in favor of understanding the causes of violence and preventing its reoccurrence. Such conclusions are obviously disheartening to the field of risk assessment if it indeed has plateaued, because it has celebrated gradual improvement and acceptance over the last several decades.

The question of the current study is whether this ceiling has been reached in risk assessment for sexual offenders. Evidence exists for both sides. Most assessments appear to have narrowed in on shared concepts of sexual offending risk, and a meta-analysis by Hanson and Morton-Bourgon (2005) found little variability in the predictive success of sexual risk assessments across studies. Parent, Guay, and Knight (2012), however, noted that the wide heterogeneity of sex offenders exposes weaknesses in traditional assessments – nevertheless acknowledging that “the empirical literature on the assessment of the risk of sexual recidivism suggests stagnation in attempts to improve predictive accuracy” (p. 1660).

In the current analysis, we attempted to determine the predictive success of three differing risk assessments among a sample of sex offenders while adopting the “coffee can” methodology of Kroner et al. (2005). Two of these – the ISORA8 and Static-99R – were developed for use with sex offenders, while the other – LSI-R – was designed to assess the level of supervision necessary for offenders in general. Assuming that the three instruments measure distinct constructs, we hypothesized that the ISORA8 and Static-99R would perform better than the LSI-R in predicting recidivism for the sex offender sample. In accordance with the findings of Kroner et al. (2005), we also predicted that the ISORA8 and Static-99R would perform equally as well as randomly-generated measures.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample population consisted of 1437 male sex offenders under supervision of a Midwestern state's Department of Corrections from 2002 to 2007. This sample includes all sex offenders under the supervision of the state during these 5 years. Offenders' average age of intake was 29.7 years ($SD = 12.54$ years). The majority of the sample had earned a high school diploma or equivalent (77.4%) and were Caucasian (88.6%), with 9.5% of offenders African-American, 1.3% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 0.6% American Indian or Alaskan Native. Most offenders were single (56.8%), although a significant portion were also married (24.0%) or divorced (17.4%), with the remainder reporting as either widowed (0.7%) or in a common-law marriage (1.2%). Offenders were predominantly assessed while under probation (61.0%), pretrial release (13.5%), or during incarceration (11.9%), with a small proportion of the sample assessed during work release (4.5%), parole (4.2%), and interstate compact probation (2.6%).

Offender recidivism was tracked over a five-year follow-up period. Recidivism was defined as a detected violation of law following an earlier conviction. General recidivism included all recidivism offenses. Post-index crimes could also be classified as sexual recidivism if the crime involved a sexual act, contact, or conduct, and violent recidivism if the crime involved the actual or threatened infliction of physical or emotional injury on another. It should be clarified that any mention of recidivism or offenses is only those detected offenses as there are always offenses that offenders commit that go undetected by law enforcement. Regarding crime characteristics, the average age of the first offense in the offender's history was 29.1 ($SD = 12.20$, range: 10–81 years), with 11.0% having committed an offense under the age of 18. Examination of offenders' crimes committed prior to assessment found that 22.3% of offenders were child molesters, 41.0% had committed sexual abuse or assault against an adult victim, 3.8% were classified as both, and 32.8% were neither (i.e., had committed some other non-contact sexual offense such as exhibitionism). Although all offenders had committed some sex offense, the distribution of index offenses varied (see Table 1 for distribution of each offender's first offense). The base rates of recidivism for the sample were 14.3%, 4.5%, and 4.8% for general, sexual, and violent offenses, respectively.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Iowa Sex Offender Risk Assessment (ISORA8)

The ISORA8 is a creation of the Iowa Division of Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning, which developed the instrument as a new sexual recidivism risk measure based on a sample of over 1000 registered Iowa sex offenders (Iowa Department of Corrections, 2010). Offenders are assessed on eight items and labeled as having low, moderate, moderate-high, or high risk based on a scoring scale ranging from 0 to 16. Various dynamic risk factors are assessed in the measure, including criminogenic needs, offender history, drug use, and multiple demographic variables.

As the ISORA8 is relatively new and based on a single sample population, research addressing it has been sparse. The few internal studies that have examined the ISORA8 have found it a good to excellent predictor of sexual or violent crimes in general (Iowa Department of Corrections, 2010) and to possess face validity (Iowa Department of Human Rights, 2006).

2.2.2. Level of Service Inventory – Revised (LSI-R)

The LSI-R was originally intended to determine the level of supervision and treatment for a particular offender and is heavily based on the theoretical and empirical work of Andrews and Bonta (2010), which presented an antisocial personality pattern, history of antisocial behavior, antisocial attitudes, and antisocial associates as the four determinants of criminal behavior. The measure is an inventory of 54 offender attributes and situations based on legal requirements and can be administered by non-mental health professionals. Items are divided into ten scales: (1) criminal history, (2) education/employment, (3) financial, (4) family/marital, (5) accommodation,

Table 1
Index offenses for first crime instance of offenders.

Offense type	Percentage
Sexual assault	28.0
Sexual abuse of a child	18.7
Other non-sexual offense	12.9
Other sexual offense	8.2
Property crime	8.3
Alcohol or drug offense	12.9
Non-sexual offense on a minor	5.1
Non-sexual assault	3.2
Domestic assault	2.2
Other violent offense	0.4

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