

Bonta, J. (2002). Offender risk assessment: Guidelines for selection and use. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 29(4), 355-379. doi: 10.1177/0093854802029004002

Individuals who work with offenders regularly conduct various assessments on their personal characteristics and potential influence on a situation. The assessment results are important to the professionals (e.g., correctional officers and therapists), as well as offenders and the community because they impact treatment and management decisions. The present author summarizes the knowledge regarding offender risk assessments and recommends the following guidelines for the selection and use of risk instruments to predict recidivism (Bonta, 2002).

1. Assessment of offender risk should be based on actuarial measures of risk

According to Bonta, assessment of offender risk should be based on actuarial measures that are structured, quantitative, and empirically linked to a relevant criterion. Two survey studies, Boothby and Clements (2000) and Gallagher, Somwary, and Ben-Porath's (1999), indicate that professionals in the field of corrections use non-actuarial risk assessment tools (e.g., Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI); Rorschach; Gender-Gestalt) to evaluate offenders. Some researchers (e.g., Grove & Meehl, 1996; Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1998) have previously emphasized that using non-actuarial assessments is unethical. Boothby and Clements (2002) indicated that actuarial assessments specifically developed for evaluating offenders (i.e., the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R), Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R), and the Violence Risk Appraisal Guide (VRAG)), were used infrequently. Interestingly, couple of studies (i.e., Bonta, Law & Hanson, 1998; Hanson & Bussiere, 1998) using mentally disordered offenders and sex offenders samples show that comparing to clinical assessments, effect sizes for the actuarial instruments are higher in predicting violent and sexual recidivism.

2. Risk assessments should demonstrate predictive validity

While many professionals focus on different psychometric characteristics of test instruments, they should focus on the predictive validity because it forecasts the likelihood reoccurrence of future behaviors (Bonta, 2002). Few studies have addressed the predictive validity of measures (e.g., MMPI-2; MCMI) that are often used with offenders by correctional psychologists. Currently, there is little data on the predictive validity of instruments used to assess risk with the offender population. The HCR-20 is a promising risk assessment tool because three studies (Grann, Belfrage, & Tengstrom, 2000; Douglas, Ogloff, Nicholls, & Grant, 1999; and Kroner & Mils 2001) have demonstrated favorable results with its predictive validity. Nevertheless, forensic and correctional professionals should exercise caution when using risk assessment tools that have not been researched extensively. Other tools (e.g., MMPI) that evaluate offenders' emotional and psychological adjustment are not developed to determine recidivism risk. Therefore, it will not suffice to use these tools when assessing such risk.

3. Use assessment instruments that are directly relevant to criminal behavior

There are two classes of behaviors that are significant within the corrections context: rule violation and psychological instability. These behaviors may or may not be interrelated (e.g., paranoia and assault on staff; severe depression is unrelated to engaging in future violence). Thus, psychological maladjustment does not necessarily lead to deviant behaviors (Bonta, 2002). Results from numerous studies (Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996; Simourd, Bonta, Andrews, & Hoge, 1991; Megargee & Bohn, 1979) reveal that the MMPI does not predict rule-violating behaviors very well when compared to other tools (e.g., PCL-R, LSI-R risk-need instrument). Despite these findings, instruments that measure psychological functioning remain popular because it is related to the graduate training most psychologists received in North America, and

only psychologists are authorized to interpret results generated from these measures. For the purpose of risk assessment, selection of appropriate risk assessment tools should be guided by empirical findings (Bonta, 2002).

4. Select instruments derived from relevant theory

If the risk instruments are based on theories of criminal behavior, assessments can be very valuable to the correctional environment. There are three broad criminal behavior theories: sociological-criminological explanations of crime, psychopathological models, and the social learning perspective. Based on the sociological-criminological theories, criminal activities are resulted from a larger social, political, or economic structure of society (Bonta, 2002). Such perspective, however, does not discuss the assessment of offenders. Moreover, research findings supporting sociological-criminological theories of crime are weak (Andres & Bonta, 1998a). Psychopathological theories state that criminal behavior occurs because of biological, emotional, cognitive, or psychological dysfunction. They are the basis for many validated measures but they do not always predict risk (see Bonta et al.'s 1998 meta-analysis). The social learning model suggests that criminal behavior is learned through interactions between cognitive, emotional, personality, and biological factors, as well as environmental reward-cost possibilities (Bonta, 2002). There is ample empirical evidence that supports the social learning theories (e.g., Gendreau et al., 1996; Andrews & Bonta, 1998a).

Researchers have identified antisocial personality, criminal history, antisocial attitudes, and social support for crime – the “Big Four” factors – that predict criminal behaviors (Andrews & Bonta, 1998a). Secondary factors that are relevant within this type of model include prosocial convention indicators (e.g., employment; education), family relationships, and variables that inhibit or facilitate conventional and antisocial actions (Bonta, 2002). Although few offender

assessment tools are based on theories of crime and delinquency, examples of those that do are the I-Level (Jesness, 1988), Conceptual Level (CL) classification systems (Hunt & Hardt, 1965), the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) (Hare, 1990), and the Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R) (Andrews & Bonta, 1995).

Van Voorhis (1994) indicates that research data on I-Level and CL's predictive validity is sparse and it focuses on institutional adjustment instead of criminal recidivism. Harpur and Hare (1994) and Hart, Hare, & Forth (1993) have found good predictive validity of offender recidivism with the PCL-R and other tools that combine PCL-R. At the time of Bonta's writing, the most theoretically based offender assessment instrument is the LSI-R. Additionally, its predictive validity is well established (e.g., Andrews & Bonta, 1995, 1998a; Gendreau, Goggin, & Smith, 2002).

5. Sample multiple domains

The standard to evaluate offender risk should use the multi-domain approach, sampling factors related to criminal behavior. Thus, criminal history, antisocial attitudes and values, antisocial personality, social supports for crime, and other relevant domains should be explored. Some tools that address different categories of factors are the HCR-20, PCL-R, Violence Risk Appraisal Guide (VRAG), and the LSI-R. Many of these assess some factors known to predict criminal behavior; however, they are not developed with the intention of sampling different domains (Bonta, 2002).

6. Assess criminogenic need factors

Presently, there are few assessments that combine dynamic and static risk factors (e.g., age, gender). Those that do combine both are risk-need scales such as the LSI-R (Bonta, 2002). Criminogenic needs are dynamic factors that are related to an individual's criminal behaviors

(Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge 1990). In other words, a change in a person's life is associated with his or her criminal behavior. Literatures have shown that offender recidivism rate decreases when the criminogenic needs are reduced (Andrews & Bonta, 1998a; Andrews, Zinger, et al., 1990). While measures have been developed to evaluate criminogenic needs and there is evidence for their predictive validity, research on their dynamic validity is almost nonexistent. Dynamic validity means that the scores obtained by a specific measure for the second time change with the outcome (Bonta, 2002). For instance, Andrews and Wormith (1984) gave probationers the Criminal Sentiments Scale (CSS) to measure their antisocial attitudes and the subjects were asked to take the test again after six months. The subsequent results show a direct relationship between an increase in pretest scores and recidivism.

Dynamic, risk-needs assessments are important for case management within corrections because staff can monitor changes in offenders and their situations, and how such changes affect their risk for engaging in criminal behaviors (Bonta, 2002).

7. Limit general personality and cognitive tests to the assessment of responsivity

The present author states that personality and cognitive tests should not be used to assess risk for recidivism; however, it could be helpful for responsivity considerations. Specifically, the type of treatment used must be congruent with the offenders' cognitive, personality, and sociocultural characteristics (Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge, 1990; Bonta, 1995). Certain assessment tools (e.g., MMPI; I-Level) may not be good at predicting recidivism, but the areas assessed (e.g., antisocial personality) in the instruments could be relevant to the offenders' risk and criminogenic needs, as well as their level of responsivity. Social and cultural factors are noteworthy as well and require consideration when developing treatment programs specifically tailored to the offender (Bonta, 2002).

8. Use different methods to assess risk and needs

Not one single assessment can perfectly predict risk and there are associated errors. The four common methods of evaluation are paper-and-pencil, file review, interview, and behavioral assessment, with disadvantages for each. For instance, a client may not understand the questions asked in a paper-and-pencil format. Another example is that the interview approach may include the interviewer's bias. To increase predictive validity, the evaluator should implement multiple methods of assessment (Bonta, 2002). In a study conducted by Andrews and colleagues (1985), they found that the correlation between evaluation scores and recidivism strengthens when different types of assessment were used.

9. Exercise professional responsibility and 10. Be nice

The last two guidelines that the current author proposes are reminders for professionals to use assessment instruments responsibly. In particular, professionals who use these tests must be well trained in administration and interpretation of test results. They should also keep abreast of the current knowledge on offender assessment. Lastly, the final guideline emphasizes the use of least restrictive alternative when conducting offender risk assessment and developing a management plan.