How to Assess the Recidivism Risk of Sexual Offenders?
A Review of Issues and Approaches for Assessing Risk and Evaluating Change in Sexual Offenders

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University of Saskatchewan

Overview

• Major approaches for comprehensive evaluation of recidivism risk of sexual offenders
• Strengths and weaknesses of current approaches
• Evaluation of change by current approaches
• Conditions under which evaluators may revise their assessments in light of new information

Major Approaches for Assessment of Recidivism Risk of Sexual Offenders

Sex Offender Risk Assessment Approaches

• Static/Empirical Actuarial (2nd generation)
  – Rapid Risk Assessment for Sexual Offense Recidivism (RRASOR)
  – Static 99/99-R
  – Static 2002/2002-R
  – Risk Matrix 2000/S
  – Sex Offender Risk Appraisal Guide (SORAG)
  – Violence Risk Appraisal Guide (VRAG)
  – Minnesota Sex Offender Screening Tool (Mn-SOST-R)
• Structured Professional Judgment (3rd generation)
  – Sexual Violence Risk-20 (SVR-20)
  – Estimate of Risk for Adolescent Sexual Offense Recidivism (ERASOR)
  – Risk for Sexual Violence Protocol (RSVP)
• Mechanical/Adjusted Actuarial (3rd and 4th generation)
  – Structured Risk Assessment-Forensic Version (SRA-FV)
  – Violence Risk Scale-Sexual Offender version (VRS-SO)
  – SVR-20 (summing the items)
Static/Empirical Actuarial (2nd generation)

- Statistically developed instruments, predictors (mostly static) selected based on magnitude of relationship to criterion and, in some cases, items differentially weighted based on magnitude and direction of this relationship. Items summed to generate total score organized into “risk bins”

- Examples include:
  - Rapid Risk Assessment for Sexual Offense Recidivism (RRASOR)
  - Static 99/99-R
  - Static 2002/2002-R
  - Risk Matrix 2000/S
  - Sex Offender Risk Appraisal Guide (SORAG)
  - Minnesota Sex Offender Screening Tool (Mn-SOST-R)

- Hanson & Morton-Bourgon (2009)
  - mean weighted $d = .67$, $k = 81$, $N = 24,089$
  - Rice & Harris (2005) tables $r_{pb} = .32$, AUC = .68

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Point Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior Sex Offenses</td>
<td>0 to +3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index Non-serial Violence</td>
<td>0 to +1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentencing Dates (4 or more)</td>
<td>0 to +1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Non-serial Violence</td>
<td>0 to +1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noncontact Sex Offenses</td>
<td>0 to +1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Victim</td>
<td>0 to +1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrelated Victim</td>
<td>0 to +1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stranger Victim</td>
<td>0 to +1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Age</td>
<td>-3 to +1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never Married (cohabitate &lt; 2 years)</td>
<td>0 to +1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Low -3 to +1, Medium-low 2 to 3, Medium-high 4 to 5, High 6 to 12
Hanson & Morton-Bourgon (2009): $d = .67$, $k = 63$, $N = 20,010$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Weighting</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Number of sex convictions</td>
<td>0 to +2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Length of sex offending history</td>
<td>-1 to +3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Under supervision when committed a sex charge/conviction</td>
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<td>5. Force or threats</td>
<td>-3 to 0</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Multiple acts on victim</td>
<td>-1 to +1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Number of different age groups</td>
<td>0 to +3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Offended against 13 to 15 year-old victim</td>
<td>0 to +2</td>
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Hanson & Morton-Bourgon (2009) $d = .76$, $k = 12$, $N = 4,672$

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<th>Item</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Lived with biological parents to age 16</td>
<td>-2 to +3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Elementary school maladjustment</td>
<td>-1 to +5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. History of alcohol problem</td>
<td>0 to +2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Marital status</td>
<td>-2 to +1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Nonviolent criminal history</td>
<td>-2 to +3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Prior violent offenses</td>
<td>-1 to +6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Prior sexual offenses</td>
<td>-1 to +5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Sex Offender Risk Appraisal Guide (Quinsey, Rice, & Harris, 1995)

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Hanson & Morton-Bourgon (2009) $d = .62$, $k = 12$, $N = 3,058$ (sexual recidivism)
Structured Professional Judgment (3rd generation)

- Static and dynamic items selected based on theory or research. Items are rated, but are not summed to generate a total score. Clinician evaluates pattern or configuration of item ratings and uses professional judgment to generate a summary risk rating.

- Examples include:
  - Sexual Violence Risk-20 (SVR-20)
  - Risk for Sexual Violence Protocol (RSVP)
  - Estimate of Risk for Adolescent Sexual Offense Recidivism (ERASOR)

- Hanson & Morton-Bourgon (2009)
  - Mean weighted $d = .46$, $k = 6$, $N = 1,131$
  - SVR-20: mean weighted $d = 1.11$, $k = 3$, $N = 245$

Mechanical/Adjusted Actuarial (3rd and 4th generation)

- Static and/or dynamic items generated from theory and research selected. Items given point ratings of severity (e.g., link to sexual violence) and item totals summed to generate a total score. “Risk bins” created from total scores are linked to sexual recidivism probabilities.

- Would also include summing of SPI items to create a total score (e.g., for psychometric research).

- Examples include:
  - Structured Risk Assessment-Forensic Version (SRA-FV)
  - Stable 2000/2007
  - Violence Risk Scale-Sexual Offender version (VRS-50)
  - SVR-20 (summing the items)

- Hanson & Morton-Bourgon (2009)
  - Mean weighted $d = .66$, $k = 29$, $N = 5,838$
    - Rice & Harris (2005) tables: $r_{sp} = .31$, $AUC = .68$

### Sexual Violence Risk-20
(Boer, Hart, Kropp, & Webster, 1997)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychosocial Adjustment</th>
<th>Sexual Offenses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual deviation</td>
<td>High density sex offenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim of child abuse</td>
<td>Multiple sex offense types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychopathy</td>
<td>Physical harm to victims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major mental illness</td>
<td>Escalation in frequency and severity of sex offenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance use problems</td>
<td>Extreme minimization or denial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicidal/homicidal ideation</td>
<td>Attitudes that support or condone sex offenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship problems</td>
<td>Future Plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment problems</td>
<td>Lacks realistic plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past nonsexual violent offenses</td>
<td>Negative attitudes toward intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past nonviolent offenses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past supervision failure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Structured Risk Assessment Forensic Version
Thornton (2002)

**Step 1: Static Risk Indicators**

- Sexual Interests Domain
  - Sexual preference for children, Sexualized violence, Sexual preoccupation

- Relational Style Domain
  - Emotional congruence with children, Lack of emotionally intimate relationships with adults, Callousness, Grievance thinking

- Self-Management Domain
  - Lifestyle impulsiveness, Resistance to rules and supervision, Dysfunctional coping

**Step 2: Need Assessment**

- Total Need Score Organized into four priority groups: Routine, Moderate-High, High, Very High

- Hanson & Morton-Bourgon (2009)
  - $d = .79$, $k = 3$, $N = 637$
Stable 2007
(Hanson, Harris, Scott, & Helmus, 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Dynamic Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Significant Social Influences</td>
<td>Poor problem solving skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity for relationship stability</td>
<td>Negative emotionality/hostility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional identification children</td>
<td>Sex drive/preoccupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostility toward women</td>
<td>Sex as coping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General social rejection loneliness</td>
<td>Deviant sexual preference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of concern others</td>
<td>Cooperation with Supervision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Impulsive

Total Score (out of 26 – 24 for those without child victim)
0-3 Low , 4-11 Moderate, 12+ High

Sexual Recidivism Rates for Risk Categories
Hanson et al. (2007)

Violence Risk Scale-Sexual Offender version
(VRS-SO; Wong, Olver, Nicholaichuk, & Gordon, 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Static Items</th>
<th>Dynamic Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1 Age at Release</td>
<td>D1 Sexually deviant lifestyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2 Age at First Sex Offense</td>
<td>D2 Sexual compulsivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3 Sex Offender Type</td>
<td>D3 Offense planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4 Prior Sex Offenses</td>
<td>D4 Criminal personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5 Unrelated Victims</td>
<td>D5 Cognitive distortions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S6 Victim Gender</td>
<td>D6 Interpersonal aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7 Prior Sentencing Dates</td>
<td>D7 Emotional control</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Pre- and post-treatment ratings based on modified application of stages of change model (Prochaska et al., 1992). Criminogenic items (2 or 3 rating) receive stages of change rating pre- and post-treatment.

Violence Risk Scale-Sexual Offender version
(VRS-SO; Wong, Olver, Nicholaichuk, & Gordon, 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>r</td>
<td>AUC</td>
<td>r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Static</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic (pre)</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic (post)</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (pre)</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (post)</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All p’s < .001
Approaches to Sexual Offender Risk Assessment: Some Conclusions

- Several measures developed to provide a structured and systematic appraisal of risk: static actuarial, SPI, mechanical/dynamic
- No evidence that any given measure has superior accuracy in predicting sexual recidivism: mean $d = 0.66$ to $0.67$ (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2009)
- Goal is to treat and manage risk to prevent recidivism (Douglas & Kropp, 2002)
- Different approaches have different clinical applications beyond mere prediction

Strengths and Weaknesses of Current Approaches

Static/Empirical Actuarial (2nd generation)

- **Strengths**
  - Easy to score
  - Objective, reliable
  - Predict sexual and violent recidivism well
  - Some capacity to inform services (e.g., intensity)

- **Weaknesses**
  - Combination and weighting of predictors may not generalize to other samples or jurisdictions
  - Capacity to inform treatment and evaluate change are limited
  - Potentially unrepresentative or limited range of predictor variables
Structured Professional Judgment (3rd generation)

• **Strengths**
  – Comprehensive range of predictor variables informed by theory and research
  – Flexibility of administration, scoring, and interpretation
  – Putatively dynamic items that may inform intervention planning, evaluating changes in risk, and community supervision/risk management strategies
  – Predict sexual and violent recidivism well

• **Weaknesses**
  – Few guidelines about combining items to inform appraisals of overall risk
  – Scores or summary ratings are not linked to a table with projected recidivism rates
  – Mechanisms for evaluating change on putatively dynamic items are not articulated, nor how to translate such changes into the overall summary risk rating

Mechanical/Adjusted Actuarial (3rd and 4th generation)

• **Strengths**
  – Comprehensive range of predictor variables informed by theory and research
  – Putatively dynamic items that may inform intervention planning, evaluating changes in risk, and community supervision/risk management strategies
  – Structured and explicit rules for combining items to generate final risk ratings
  – May have structured mechanisms for evaluating change
  – Linked to a table of recidivism probabilities
  – Predict sexual and violent recidivism well

• **Weaknesses**
  – Potentially less flexibility in use compared to SPJ(?)
  – Make full use of the change information for informing final appraisal of risk and sexual/violent recidivism probability
  – Complexity in scoring for some measures
How Well do Current Approaches Measure Change?

Static/Empirical Actuarial (2nd generation)
• Provide a static appraisal of risk
• Scores tend to remain consistent from pre- to post-treatment even though risk may change
• Cannot capture treatment related change
• Variables that may change?
  – Having a birthday
  – Developing and sustaining a relationship
  – Committing more crimes

Structured Professional Judgment (3rd generation)
• Has putatively dynamic variables
• More promise?
• Guidelines for measuring change on the variables?
  – Re-rating the items — summary risk rating can be downgraded
• Research examining whether SPJ ratings can change and if such changes are meaningful?

Mechanical/Adjusted Actuarial (3rd and 4th generation)
• Also have putatively dynamic variables
• Structured mechanism for assessing change versus re-rating items
• Quantifiable index of change
  – Change score
• More research examining whether changes in risk (improvements or deteriorations) linked to changes in recidivism
Appraisals of Change

- How to examine if changes are important or meaningful?
  - Examine magnitude of pre-post differences
  - Examine if exacerbations in dynamic variables are associated with increases in recidivism
  - Examine if improvement in dynamic variables are associated with reductions in recidivism

Exacerbation of Dynamic Markers Associated with Increases in Recidivism

- Hanson et al. (2007)
  - Acute ratings significantly associated with sexual (or violent) recidivism 45 days prior to recidivism:
    - Victim access
    - Sexual preoccupations
    - Rejection of supervision
    - Hostility
    - Substance abuse

Pre-Post Treatment Differences

Studies demonstrating significant changes in pre and post-treatment scores. All findings reported in Cohen’s d (recorded or computed).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beggs and Grace (2010) (n = 218)</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanson et al. (2007) (n = 292)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nunes &amp; Cortoni (2007) (n = 72-87)</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>- .49</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nunes et al. (2011) (n = 87)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>- .49</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Olver et al. (2007) (n = 321)</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>-</td>
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Relationship of Change from Credible Change Agents to Reductions in Recidivism

- Relationship between VRS-SO change score and sexual recidivism?
  - $r = -.10$ to $-.09$, $p < .10$ (charge vs. conviction) (Olver et al., 2007)
  - $r = -.15$, $p < .05$ (Beggs, 2008)

- Potential Problem?
  - Does not take into account individual differences in risk level
    - i.e., pre-treatment risk level (e.g., Static 99, etc.)
  - Challenge is disaggregating the relationship of risk and treatment change to recidivism
### Who's highest risk?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk level</th>
<th>Change</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Low</th>
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</table>
| High       | Offender A  
Pre-tx score of 50  
– 7 pts change =  
post-tx score of 43 |
| Low        | Offender B  
Pre-tx score of 25  
– 0 pts change =  
post-tx score of 25 |

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<td>Offender C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Offender D</td>
<td>Pre-tx score of 25 – 5 pts change = post-tx score of 20</td>
<td>Offender B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mechanical/Adjusted Actuarial (3rd and 4th generation) Appraisals of Change

Assessing Changes in Sexual Offender Risk: Some Conclusions

- Assumption that risk is dynamic
  - It can get better (be reduced) or worse (increase)
- Must be measured across at least two time points (Douglas & Skeem, 2006; Kraemer et al., 1997)
- Linkage established between changes in risk with changes (reductions) sexual recidivism
- Important to account for baseline levels of risk
- Require a stable and credible change agent that may generate change (e.g., treatment, risk management/supervision, aging?)
- Can we do a better job of incorporating change information into our assessments?

Other Change Appraisal Approaches

Psychometric assessment measures
- Nunes, Babchishin, & Cortoni (2011)

Measures developed to assess readiness to change
- Goal Attainment Scaling (Hoge, 1994)
  - Stirpe, Wilson, & Long (2001)
- Treatment Readiness, Responsivity, and Gain Scale (Serin, Kennedy, & Mailloux, 2005)
  - Serin, Mailloux, & Kennedy (2007)
Conditions Under which Assessments May be Revised in Light of New Information

What factors mitigate risk?

- Treatment?
- Growing older?
- Serious change in health (e.g., coma?)
- Getting married?
- Improvement in community supports?

Reducing Risk Through Treatment?

- Assumes dynamic variables are dynamic, and...
  - that targeting these areas and...
  - making substantive changes in them are...
  - linked to reductions in recidivism (i.e., need principle)

Factors Mitigating Sexual Offender Risk: Sexual Offender Treatment
Hanson, Bourgon, Helmus, & Hodgson, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Treated</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual recidivism</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual recidivism</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent recidivism</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General recidivism</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>48.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lösel & Schmucker (2005)  
$k = 69, N = 22,181$

$k = 22, OR = .77$

$k = 10, OR = .92$

$k = 13, OR = .75$
The Mitigating Impact of Age?

- Does treatment and change information mean different things for older offenders?
  - Greater risk mitigation?
  - Or does it make much difference for older offenders?
  - Implication for post-treatment risk evaluations?

Relationship of age and treatment status to sexual recidivism

![Graph showing relationship between age, treatment status, and sexual recidivism](Olver, Nicholaichuk, Gu, & Wong, 2011)

Relationship of age and treatment status to violent recidivism

![Graph showing relationship between age, treatment status, and violent recidivism](Olver et al., 2011)

Adjusting assessments by incorporating treatment information

How may this be done?
Offense Analogue and Offense Replacement Behaviors (OABs and ORBs)

- **OABs** are analogues or facsimiles of criminal behaviors (criminogenic needs) observable in custodial or other controlled settings.
- **ORBs**: positive, prosocial behaviors that should take the place of OABs.
  - ORBs are not just socially appropriate behaviors, they must be relevant for risk reduction for that individual.
  - Treatment improvement should be demonstrated by gradual decrease in OABs together with gradual increase in ORBs.

Sample OABs and ORBs with Sex Offenders

**Sample OABs:**
- Deviant or inappropriate fantasies
  - (e.g., past victims, staff)
- Excessive masturbation or use for coping
- Deliberate exposure to triggering stimuli
  - (e.g., magazine photos of children, watching inappropriate TV shows)
- Lusty talk
  - (e.g., sex jokes, objectifying talk)
- Lewd or inappropriate comments toward staff
- Preoccupations with staff
  - (e.g., staring at a staff member, following them around, etc.)
- Sexually muscling or grooming other patients
- Lying and manipulative behaviors toward staff
  - (e.g., as proxy for grooming)

**Sample ORBs:**
- Engages in appropriate fantasy
  - (e.g., consenting partner appropriate with respect to age, etc.)
- Avoidance of triggering stimuli
  - (e.g., in print, television, etc.)
- Capacity to control deviant arousal
  - (e.g., PPG control sessions)
- Use of problem solving to deal with interpersonal concerns
- Expounding prosocial sexual attitudes and beliefs, and rejecting or challenging distorted sex offender cognitions
- Use of appropriate coping strategies (e.g., as opposed to sex) to manage stressors

Example:
VRS-SO Pre- & Post-Treatment Ratings

Static

Pre-Tx Risk Score

Pre-Tx Dynamic

↓

Change

Post-Tx Risk Score

Adjusting Risk Appraisals Incorporating Treatment and Other Relevant Information

• To adjust or not to adjust?
• Apply an age correction?
• Downgrade risk level based on presence of relevant risk mitigating factors?
• Rate all measures as usual, provide a global summary risk rating based on the balance of all information?
  — Resolving discrepancies of different risk cutoffs provided by different measures (e.g., Barbaree et al., 2006)

Adjusting Risk Appraisals Incorporating Treatment and Other Relevant Information

• Considerations:
  — Post-treatment risk category
  — Post-treatment recidivism rates
  — Post-treatment percentile rank on risk measures
  — Post-treatment quantity of change
  — Post-treatment stage of change
  — Post-treatment OABs and ORBs

Adjusting Risk Appraisals Incorporating Treatment and Other Relevant Information

• Systematically formulate a post-treatment evaluation of risk based on:
  — Balance of static and dynamic measures
  — Using a structured change assessment metric
  — Rerating the items
  — Use of additional measures that evaluate treatment progress or change
  — Noting relevant change indices (e.g., OABs/ORBs)
Adjusting Risk Appraisals Incorporating Treatment and Other Relevant Information

"Instead of adjusting risk levels assessed using static tools, it is probably clinically more parsimonious, objective and, ultimately, more defensible to assess risk using tools with dynamic predictors and to re-assess risk at appropriate intervals. Static risk tools, if used in treatment settings, should be supplemented with dynamic tools that can assess change especially in post-treatment risk evaluations. In a post-treatment assessment context, the two sets of measures can be used in tandem and possible discrepancies in risk estimates can be reconciled using professional discretion. Part of this would entail evaluating the reliability of the change agent and the credibility of the client’s change."

Olver & Wong, 2011, p. 124

Thank you for your time and attention!