Assessing the Strengths and Dynamic Risk of Sexual Offenders: How Do Police Officers Experience this New Approach?

Stephanie Kewley, Ph.D., Birmingham City University

Risk assessment tools that predict sexual recidivism are an essential part of formal risk management planning processes. They are critical in helping criminal justice agencies deploy appropriate resources in accordance with perceived risk. Thus, they serve to protect the public from harm and manage public resources effectively. However, one of the consequences of a risk reduction and community protection approach is that while public protection concerns are addressed, the legitimate needs of the client tend to be ignored. Indeed, because such approaches are characterised by control, restriction, mandatory treatment and surveillance, a number of unintended consequences are experienced. These include stigmatization, unemployment and poor housing, all of which prevent people from fully reintegrating back into society.

Perhaps a more ethical approach to risk assessment and risk management planning might be one that considers the strengths and needs of the client. Strengths based approaches enable people to build personal capacity, develop community and social bonds and ultimately contribute to society by living a meaningful and offence free life. Strengths based approaches inevitably serve the needs of the public and criminal justice agencies, along with those of the client. Yet, application of this approach is a challenge given the penal climate of punishment and risk reduction in which correctional practitioners currently operate. Indeed, this tension is perhaps most notable for police officers. In England and Wales, under Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) the police have a statutory duty to manage the risks posed by those convicted of sexual offending. Thus, while the primary role of officers is to detect and investigate crime, those who chose to specialise in the management of sexual offenders are required to adopt values that are more rehabilitative in nature and potentially conflict with the wider organisational values and aims.

Yet, in a pioneering project, the police service across England and Wales, has recently implemented into its mainstream practice, a tool designed to assess both the risks and the strengths presented by those convicted of sexual offending. In possibly one of the most significant practice developments since the introduction of the Sex Offenders Act 1997, the introduction of the Active Risk Management System (ARMS) has seen an innovative step change in the way how police officers risk assess and structure the management of those convicted of sexual offending. ARMS is a structured assessment tool designed to assess both the dynamic factors known to be related to sexual recidivism (adult
males only) along with protective factors that might support the desistance process. A total of thirteen risk and protective factors are assessed (8 risks and 5 protective factors). Assessors are required to rate the presence of each factor (high, medium or low) and detail the required risk management action. Findings from the assessment inform subsequent risk management plans.

Given this experimental shift in police tactics, evaluation is required. In a two year research programme examination of the implementation, application and follow up of this tool and subsequent risk management plans will be undertaken. An in-depth exploration of the experiences of police officers with the responsibility for managing those with sexual convictions and clients themselves will be examined. This current paper presents the findings from one study which examined the experiences of police officers as they apply the tool in practice. Data was collected through four focus groups of police officers and staff with direct responsibility for the management and assessment of sexual offenders. Focus groups took place across four police areas in England and Wales. At the time of writing, focus groups are scheduled to take place in February 2016 thus sample size and demographics are yet unknown. It is expected however that between 6-10 participants will participate in each focus group. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis will be used to analyse the data, enabling an in-depth understanding of the experiences of this change.

Learning Goals and Objectives:

• Introduce delegates to the ARMS risk assessment tool which, from the perspective of the police service in England and Wales, is an innovative risk assessment tool. In sharing this tool, detail of how it is applied in practice and relates to formal risk management processes in England and Wales will also be discussed.

• Share the findings from four focus groups which examined the experiences of police practitioner’s application of the tool. At the time of writing, data collection and analysis is in progress however it is expected that several themes will emerge from the focus groups. These are likely to include issues such as ethical concerns, conflicts in personal and organisational values, and challenges for officers when applying strengths to sexual offenders, perhaps due to beliefs about sexual offender risk.

• It is also expected that several examples of best practice will emerge from this study. These will also be shared with delegates
Victoria Police Innovation in Sex Offender Risk Assessment

Karla Lopez, Ph.D., Victoria Police
Douglas Boer, Ph.D., University of Canberra

Victoria Police is responsible for the administration of the Sex Offender Registration Act 2004 which aims to prevent further sexual violence by known sex offenders.

The offender management framework is a Victoria Police innovation designed to:
- Complement the registration (data-collection) process through gathering risk related intelligence
- Optimise use of police resources to monitor registered sex offenders in the community
- Provide a flexible long-term strategy for the prioritisation of high-risk registered sex offenders

The process of sex offender risk assessment is increasingly relied upon by such preventative schemes to identify offenders who pose the highest risk of further offending to coordinate resources accordingly. However, it has long been established that actuarial tools alone are not enough to guide intervention efforts due to their reliance on static variables. Alternatively, whilst dynamic risk assessments are useful in identifying criminogenic needs to be targeted for intervention, they tend to be lengthy and require clinical training and experience to code. This presents particular challenges in a police environment where even highly trained law enforcement professionals lack the expertise and the time to code these tools reliably.

The SHARP (sexual deviance, history of supervision violation, anti-social orientation, risky environment and protective factors) was established as an empirically grounded dynamic risk assessment tool better suited for police use. It is not only a brief measure but it also relies on offender data which is readily available to police. The presentation will outline key features of the SHARP including benefits and limitations. The innovative components of this approach, especially within a policing agency will be highlighted as will the crucial strategies being employed by Victoria Police to support a successful implementation. There is also scope for some preliminary validation data to be discussed.

**Learning Goals and Objectives:**
- The purpose and extent of sex offender registration legislation in the state of Victoria, Australia
- Outline of the offender management framework which stipulates the use of risk assessment to target high risk offenders. This will also highlight the novelty of this approach by law enforcement.
- Outline of the operational reasons which led to the development of a sex offender dynamic risk assessment tool designed for police use.
• Outline of the SHARP validation research
• Outline SHARP risk factors and scoring
• Brief case studies pertaining to its operational use and results