

► Overview

The term “sex offender” implies that the individuals who engage in sexually abusive behavior are all alike and can be managed in the same way. However, because adult and juvenile sex offenders are such diverse populations, “one size fits all” approaches are neither appropriate nor effective. Determining what to do with which offenders, how and when to do it, and why it should be done demands careful consideration to the varied levels of risk, needs, development, and functioning of these individuals. This requires having access to – and making good use of – comprehensive assessment information. Put simply, well executed assessments are the key to informed decisionmaking with adult and juvenile sex offenders.

The following are among the many decisions that can be guided by assessments throughout the criminal and juvenile justice process:

- Sentencing, disposition, and placement;
- Targets, intensity, and dosage of treatment;
- Release from correctional or residential settings;
- Level of community supervision, including contact requirements;
- Types of supervision conditions imposed; and
- Application of sex offender-specific legislation, such as registration and community notification.

Each of these decisions has significant implications for public safety and, as such, the stake-

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holders involved in sex offender management will benefit from having reliable and comprehensive assessment information upon which to base their decisions.

Some assessments with sexually abusive individuals occur at a specified point in time within the criminal or juvenile justice process (e.g., pre-sentencing, pre-release) and are intended to assist decisionmakers with a specific inquiry. Other assessments occur at routine intervals (e.g., every six months, every contact) and are designed to provide practitioners with an ongoing snapshot of an individual’s stability, adjustment, compliance, progress, and overall circumstances, such that case management strategies can be maintained or adjusted accordingly.

As jurisdictions begin to explore the ways in which assessments are approached and used within their current systems of adult and juvenile sex offender management, it is helpful to consider them within the context of four broad categories:

- Risk assessments, to estimate recidivism potential at given points in time;
- Criminal/juvenile justice assessments, conducted by court or correctional personnel to

inform initial decisions in the management process (e.g., disposition, initial supervision plans);

- Clinical assessments, conducted by specialized mental health professionals as a means of enhancing intervention planning; and
- Ongoing, multidisciplinary assessments, which involve cumulative information-gathering and information-sharing in order to focus and refine case management strategies over time.

None of these categories is mutually exclusive; important intersections and interactions are expected. Regardless of the category into which an assessment is placed, the quality and utility of most assessments often hinge on the synthesis of information from multiple parties.

By virtue of their distinct roles in the overall management process, different stakeholders tend to be limited to the kinds of information that they independently collect or observe about a given individual (e.g., from psychological testing, field contacts, treatment encounters, reports from victims), which provides a narrow and incomplete understanding of the adult or youthful offender. When key information is gathered and shared across disciplines and agencies, a more complete “picture” emerges. As a general rule, therefore, relying on a single data point or sole data source for critical decisionmaking is inadvisable.

Using multiple data sources as part of the assessment process enhances the reliability, validity, and ultimate usefulness of these assessments. Areas of convergence increase the confidence of professionals’ decisionmaking, whereas areas of divergence should lead to further exploration. When assessments of adult and juvenile sex offenders are comprehensive and reliable, stakeholders are better able to develop corresponding interventions

and responses that reduce the likelihood of future victimization, increase public safety, and maximize limited resources.

► *A Useful Framework to Guide Assessments*

Over the past several years, as policymakers and practitioners within the criminal and juvenile justice fields have become more invested in assessment-driven and evidence-based interventions, many have come to rely on three core principles of effective correctional intervention: risk, needs, and responsivity (see Andrews & Bonta, 2007; Cullen & Gendreau, 2000). When used as a framework for assessment with adult and juvenile sex offenders, these principles address the following questions:

- Which sex offenders will benefit most from treatment and supervision interventions?
- What are the specific targets of treatment and supervision that will have the greatest impact on reducing recidivism potential among sex offenders?
- How should treatment and supervision services for sex offenders be delivered in order to ensure maximum benefit from the interventions?

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