

Assessing Violence Risk

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Risk assessment has become a central aspect of practice in both criminal justice and forensic mental health settings, where risk is often routinely assessed at all stages of involvement (eg, in pre-sentence reports; in sentence and care planning and progress monitoring; in changes to status/levels of restriction such as in prison re-categorisation; in pre-release decisions and planning; in decisions regarding levels of monitoring and intervention in the community; and perhaps in recall to prison decisions). Outside prison and community criminal justice settings, forensic practitioners also assess risk for a range of different purposes, including child protection, mental health intervention, and to prevent terrorist activities.

Risk decisions are most commonly made in relation to people who have already committed at least one offence; however, in many instances risk decisions must be made on individuals who have no convictions, or no known histories of violence. This type of decision-making is particularly difficult as the majority of research studies in this area have focused on predicting recidivism: that is, re-offending in people who have already committed at least one criminal offence. Moreover, much of what we know about risk has come from studies involving people who have been detained under mental health legislation and/or convicted and incarcerated for at least one violent offence. This limits the validity of this work when applied to other groups. This is also true for some offender groups, for example, there is only limited violence risk research available for women, children and older adults, ethnic minorities and Indigenous groups, and individuals with intellectual or physical disabilities.

It is important to note from the outset that violence risk assessment decisions have hugely important consequences for a range of people, including those being assessed, the families of the assessed, the public (as potential future victims), and the professionals (and their employers/organisations) making the decisions. Furthermore, these decisions have financial and resource consequences, in terms of the cost of the recommended intervention(s) and/or monitoring, and the costs of the eventual outcomes. It is important, therefore, that decisions are made carefully, follow evidence based-practice principles, and are defensible. The aim of this chapter is to provide the basic information that professionals who conduct this type of assessment need to know.

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