

An external exploration of short-term risk assessment tools appropriate for use in the Swedish Prison and Probation services.

Background

The main goal with this work was to look for systematic, scientific based tools for the assessment of short-term risk for recidivism in the Swedish prison and probation services. Since the introduction of assessment tools for predicting recidivism, they have become an integrated part of prison and probation services in most western countries. These tools are generally designed to predict recidivism over long time periods, from a few months to several years. However, daily work in prisons and mental care units sometimes require faster decision about security that concerns acute or imminent risk for incidents (e.g., violence). Thus, the strategy for this study was to search for usable systematic, scientific - based, short - term risk assessment tools as potential candidates for use in the Swedish prison and probation system.

Method

We performed a database search and used the following databases: Google Scholar, APA PsycArticles, and APA PsycInfo. To broaden the perspective we also send out a survey to EuroPris Knowledge Management System (KMS) and to the Confederation of European Probation (CEP) to reveal the use of short-term risk assessment tools in prison and probation systems in other European countries. The questions to these authorities was: "Is risk assessment for short-term, acute or imminent risk for (e.g. violence, disruptive behavior, misconduct etc.) done in prison (or probation) settings in your country by means of any structured or systematic scheme or tool"?

Answer: yes or no

If yes, please explain and if yes: is this tool evaluated? – Validity

Results

The results of the database search lead to the suggestions of three potential useful instruments for short- term assessment of risk in Swedish settings: Dynamic Appraisal of Situational Aggression: Inpatient version" (DASA-IV); Brøset Violence Checklist (BVC) and the clinical subscale of HCR-20). These instrument are evaluated with scientific methods and have displayed promising practical qualities.

The surveys to the European countries through the EuroPris Knowledge Management System (KMS) which included eleven countries showed that most European prison authorities use a general reception procedure for all individuals sentenced to prison, including assessment of risk and needs with methods based in scientific research. Most of these methods were designed for prediction of long-term risk. The Croatian prison system however, is using short-term assessments but these assessments is not supported by any systematic, validated risk assessment instrument. Prison units in UK generally use risk assessments for managing day-to day risk. These assessments also includes other issues such

as suitability for education, employment and a judgement of the social contact from a risk perspective. The answers from UK do not clarify how these assessments is done.

The answers from of the probation systems in Europe mediated by CEP - including twenty-two countries - showed that the probation systems in Belgium, France, Germany - Schleswig-Holstein, Italy, Luxemburg, Slovakia, and Slovenia do not include systematic, structured risk assessments in their method arsenal. Although the authorities in Belgium (Flanders) do assessments of political extremist violence. Probation authorities in Czech Republic, Hungary and Ukraine use risk for traditional long-term risk assessment with tools that either is developed by the authorities themselves or that is built on tools - or part of tools - that were developed in other countries. Concerning the main question for this study - if any of the probation authorities in these countries use risk assessment that specifically measure acute or imminent risk for violence , there is nothing in the answers from the survey that suggest that this is the case.

Conclusions

Although, the use of systematic risk assessment tools as a support for decision about security problems is an integrated part in most prison and in mental health as well as in youth care in most western countries most of these tools are designed for assessment of risk for recidivism from several months to multiple years after the assessment. Sometimes, in prisons, custodies or in mental health services there is a need for assessment of risk in a much shorter time span and the validity for the most used long-term tools are in such situations unknown. Results from database search suggest three potential useful instruments for use in the Swedish prison and probation services. The results from the two surveys that were presented to prison and probation authorities in Europe showed that long-term risk assessments vid systematic, scientific based tools are standard in prison settings but short-term risk assessments are rare in prison settings and non- existent in probation services.