

Introduction to the Journal's Section Devoted to Risk Management

Mary Alice Conroy, Sam Houston State University, maconroy@shsu.edu

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Over the past thirty years, much literature has addressed the issue of violence risk assessment. During that time, the field moved away from the idea that violent behavior can be explicitly predicted with any reasonable degree of clinical certainty to the idea of applying scientific principles to establishing a level of risk. Researchers narrowed the focus to particular types of individuals or groups in a variety of contexts. A good number of instruments, using both strict actuarial methods and structured professional judgment, were developed, focusing on types of perpetrators, types of victims, and defined situations.

In recent years, the judiciary has begun to take serious note of the science of risk assessment. However, legal professionals quickly raise the next questions: “So, this person is high risk for violence; what do we do about it? Is the only answer to incapacitate all those at risk for violent behavior?” In terms of both practicality and cost, this would seem unworkable. In addition, many jurisdictions honor the doctrine of *least restrictive alternative*—an individual should not be deprived of liberty beyond the point at which the deprivation is essential to public safety. Courts, then, seek a balance between the safety of the general population and the civil liberties of a potentially violent person.

In 1997, Heilbrun proposed the concept of risk management, separate from, but related to, risk assessment. As with risk assessment, emphasis would be upon the application of scientific principles and research. However, whereas risk assessment focuses on investigating the level of risk posed, risk management focuses on strategies for reducing it. The very term risk management makes clear that the risk most probably cannot be eliminated, but only reduced to a level society finds acceptable. Whereas risk assessment places emphasis on static factors related to risk, risk management is more likely to investigate dynamic variables that are fluid and amenable to intervention. Risk assessment may be conducted at one specific point in time, whereas risk management is more likely to be extended over time and subject to frequent revision.

Early research in the risk-management arena tended to focus on areas of high public interest. For example, there is still the common perception that those with serious mental illness may easily become violent. A variety of studies have focused on the effectiveness of outpatient civil commitment (Hiday, 2006; Hodgins, 2001; Petrla, Ridgeley, & Borum, 2003; Swanson, Borum, Swartz, Hiday, Wagner, & Burns, 2001).

Winick and Kress (2003) edited a special journal issue discussing the advantages and disadvantages of various models. Others have addressed the effectiveness of specific psychotropic medications to reduce violent behavior (Krakowski, Czbor, Citrome, Bank, & Cooper, 2006).

Another group garnering much public concern is sexual offenders. Various models to reduce this type of recidivism have been proposed and critiqued (Conroy, 2006). Treatment approaches to risk management have been evaluated with mixed results (Hall, 1995; Hanson, Broom, & Stephenson, 2004; Hanson et al., 2002; Marques, Wiederanders, Day, Nelson, & van Ommeren, 2005). English, Pullen and Jones (1996) proposed what has become known as the “containment model,” but little research has been done to establish its efficacy.

These are but a few examples, as forensic psychologists are apt to need to address risk management in many other contexts. Increased interest has arisen into how to best manage violent juveniles. Courts and agencies are concerned about how to prevent future child abuse when termination of parental rights is not an appropriate avenue. Highly publicized campus violence has left schools scrambling for viable methods to manage risk. Industrial organizations are looking for guidance in formulating plans to prevent violence among employees. State correctional systems are being stretched to the point of needing to reduce prison populations. How can this be done while minimizing risk to the public? Should this be done differently if the offender is female? What if the offender is young? What if the offender is coming from a lower SES environment? What if the offender is being released to a semi-structured environment of some kind?

More research into the many facets of risk management is clearly needed. This may take on a variety of forms, including (but not limited to) empirical data collection, program evaluation, case studies, review of extant models, review of public policy or case law, as well as further theoretical development. This section of the journal will collect a variety of articles that address risk management from various perspectives. It is hoped that, as the section grows, it will inspire additional researchers and investigators to come forward.

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