



Research at a glance

Low Risk Offenders: What Does the Research Tell Us?

Recent research reaffirms the Risk principle but agreement on what defines a low risk offender is required.

Why we did this study

The Risk principle of the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) framework advises that higher intensity service and programs should be reserved for higher risk offenders, while lower risk offenders should be provided with low intensity or minimal services. The purpose of this paper was to review the current literature to determine if the risk principle continues to apply and to identify evidence-based guidelines on the provision of interventions for low risk offenders.

What we did

We conducted a literature review of the more recent effective corrections research as well as publications examining the effectiveness of interventions with low risk offenders. The primary questions of interest were: (1) does the current research continue to confirm the risk principle? and, (2) what does a 'low risk' level mean in terms of correctional practice?

What we found

The following are key points extracted from the literature review:

- The Risk principle is still relevant to correctional planning and supervision. Research continues to demonstrate that the lowest risk offenders as assessed on well-validated tools require low intensity or no service to maintain a risk level that is comparable to non-offenders.
- A challenge to the Risk principle is deciding what defines low risk. Most actuarial correctional tools assess outcomes based on general reoffending and may not be as sensitive to assessing risk for specific offence patterns. Consideration should be given to coupling risk estimates with estimates of potential seriousness of the reoffending.
- The designation of low risk varies across constituencies and offence categories. Initiatives that establish a common vocabulary defining risk levels and agreement on effective approaches would be helpful to increase consistency.
- One such initiative is the Risk Communication Project (Council of State Governments Justice

Center, 2016) which provides preliminary guidelines on how to organize thinking around risk level. Their proposal includes a description of what constitutes varying levels of risk as well as what intervention strategies would be required.

- The Council proposes two levels of low risk. It appears that relatively few federally sentenced offenders would be classified at the lowest risk category (i.e., level of risk similar to non-offenders; no or transitory criminogenic needs) which is not surprising given a federal custody is determined by a sentence length of two years or greater.

What it means

There is a lack of agreement in the literature on what defines low risk. Although still under development, the Risk Communication Project launched a debate on how general risk can be understood that could help agencies in directing program and supervision strategies. Missing at this stage is a further discussion of how risk assessment could incorporate consideration of the risk for serious harm associated with reoffending in addition to a general assessment of risk and need. In planning interventions for low risk offenders, case management should endeavor not to interfere with protective factors that have contributed to offenders' lower risk such as: involvement in prosocial social networks, structured leisure and employment opportunities.

For more information

Nolan, A., & Stewart, L. (2017). *Low risk offenders: What does the research tell us?* (Research Report R-383). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

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