

Editorial

Risk assessment in Criminology: The science behind the principle of «never too early, never too late» to assess risk and intervene

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Abstract

Risk assessment permeates our daily lives, guiding the decisions we make as criminologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. However, it has been heavily criticised and ambivalently received in the context of criminal justice.

This special issue focuses on discussing the importance of risk assessment as a practice that enables intervention by identifying valuable resources and opportunities to counteract crime and promote prosocial action.

David P. Farrington's research legacy has always centred on the extent to which criminal behaviour can be reliably predicted, depending on the different levels of risk posed by offenders (*risk principle*) and their criminal careers, which are intertwined with the protective factors that cushion them. The assessment of risk alone is insufficient if it is not combined with an understanding of the criminogenic needs that characterise the person's psychosocial reality and functioning (*need principle*). Only then can an intervention be successfully planned (*responsivity principle*). The articles in this special issue represent an international effort to highlight the science and practice of risk assessment by examining the various settings in which it is applied, using different methods and tools.

Keywords: Risk assessment, risk factors, criminogenic needs, protective factors, responsivity.

We are grateful to Professor Roberto Catanesi – Editor in Chief – of The Italian Journal of Criminology (Rassegna Italiana di Criminology) to host this special issue on risk assessment in criminology, taking up the legacy of one of the most prominent, prolific, world-wide recognised and esteemed criminologists: Professor David P. Farrington, who passed away on 5 November 2024.

Risk assessment in Criminology: The science behind the principle of «never too early, never too late» to assess risk and intervene

Editorial

Forensic risk assessment is important, but at the same time it has been heavily criticised and ambivalently welcomed in the context of criminal justice. And yet risk assessment permeates our daily lives, guiding the decisions we reach and the choices we end up making as criminologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. This incongruence may be because risk assessment has long been seen as an end rather than a means: a kind of static procedure of categorising offenders. The remnants of this prejudiced view of risk assessment explains why policymakers have long focused their attention primarily on the «true positives» rather than the «false negatives». In other words, *what people do* can attract the attention of experts and authorities more than *what they don't do*.

A full discussion of risk assessment is important because it helps to move beyond the assertion that it is a practice that restricts a person's life within the confines of their *zone of risk*. Rather, it is a practice that enables intervention by identifying worthwhile resources and opportunities to counteract crime and take prosocial action.

Risk assessment encourages observation and professional responsibility, and while actuarial risk assessment focuses on accuracy, professional structured assessment focuses on identifying individual differences to enable the best possible individualised intervention. Therefore, an integration of these methods is what professionals should be working towards. This would include: (1) ensuring the accuracy of risk assessment tools; (2) using these to inform early intervention; (3) using these to inform management decisions and to (4) promote individualised treatment; (5) using these to monitor change; and (6) communicating risk in a way that encourages governments to invest in research and intervention to prevent children from becoming tomorrow's criminals.

Professor David P. Farrington's research legacy has always focused on the extent to which criminal behaviour can be reliably predicted, depending on the different levels of risk posed by offenders (*risk principle*) and their criminal careers, which are intertwined with the protective factors that cushion them. The assessment of risk alone is an insufficient process if it is not combined with an understanding of the criminogenic needs that characterise the person's psychosocial reality and functioning (*need principle*). Only then can an intervention be successfully planned (*responsivity principle*).

From a public policy perspective, if the assessment of risk of future antisocial behaviour is not based on research

evidence, it is unsound and fallacious; if it does not inform clinicians, it is impractical; if it is out of scope, it is unhelpful; if it is not tailored to the criminogenic needs of the individual, it is unethical.

This special issue addresses the science and practice of risk assessment by looking at the different settings in which it is applied, using different methods and tools.

International colleagues and friends have enthusiastically joined us to reflect together on how we can create a more respectful and liveable world by preventing children from slipping into a life of antisocial behaviour and adults from embarking a life of crime.

Each article of this special issue offers an outstanding contribution of how criminology can strengthen our comprehension of people and their world, and presents the richness of the scope of criminology as a science and as an interdisciplinary and interprofessional practice.

Professor Friedrich Lösel addresses the importance of risk assessment in criminology by analysing its concepts, but also its challenges and perspectives. The article provides a comprehensive critical analysis of individual-oriented risk assessment to illustrate the importance of linking risk assessment and interventions. Through a detailed examination of the research findings, it becomes clear that explaining the difference between risk and danger and distinguishing the different types of risk is useful in understanding how and why risk assessment and risk management need to work together.

The article by Professor Raymond Corrado and Dr Amanda Champion is dedicated to the Cracow Instrument (CI). This is a clear example of how Farrington's developmental theoretical framework played an important role in the development of such a comprehensive risk/needs intervention and case management tool. The CI was designed and developed to help identify children and young people at risk of, or currently involved in, serious and violent behaviour using indicators from five key developmental stages, which are explained technically but very clearly in the article.

As Professor David P. Farrington's commitment was «saving children from a life of crime» through scientific research, Dr. Leena K. Augimeri and Dr. Debra J. Pepler (see their article in this issue) focus on the Stop Now And Plan (SNAP®) programme, which helps children develop practical skills to stop and think before they act, promoting better decision making in difficult situations. The Early Assessment Risk List (EARL) is a structured professional assessment scheme designed to recognise risks and develop risk management strategies. For any intervention programme to be successful, it is important to take a cul-

turally responsive and safety-focused approach, to be accountable, and to ensure that scientific and professional efforts are aligned, practical, cost-effective and make a meaningful contribution to the advancement of the field.

There is no better formulation of the essential scope of criminology, than that of Dr Christopher J. Koegl: «when it comes to addressing the problem of crime, all roads lead to prevention and early intervention» (see Koegl's article in this special issue). Indeed, the international community agrees that early provision of programmes for antisocial children is the most promising and cost-effective way to prevent their later involvement in criminal activity. The EARL-20B instrument, which was originally developed to assess the risk of later criminality in children, is an important tool for predicting health and mental health outcomes, as has already been shown in the literature.

When considering social functioning and life adjustment, it is essential to look beyond the psychopathic illusion of «health invulnerability» for reasons of treatment and prevention. Dr Guy C. M. Skinner, Dr Henriette Bergström, Professor Darrick Jolliffe and Professor Georgia Zara, led by their mentor Professor David P. Farrington, have investigated psychopathy and health in the prospective longitudinal Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD) (see their article in this special issue). Psychopathy was measured using the Hare Psychopathy Checklist (screening version), and health (e.g., physical health, mental health, hospitalisation, disabling medical conditions and premature mortality) was measured using self-report and medical records. The CSDD males who were high on psychopathic scores were also those who engaged in antisocial lifestyles (e.g., heavy drinking, post-drinking fights, smoking, sexual promiscuity), which is not *per se* a sign of poor health or premature mortality, at least according to self-reports. Some interesting differences emerged when looking at the GP reports on mental health, in which some aspects of problematic mental health conditions emerged. Given the var-

ious forms of impairment that psychopathy can cause in a person's life and in society, further investigation of psychopathy in community samples is certainly needed.

The Integrated Cognitive Antisocial Potential (ICAP) theory developed by Professor David P. Farrington is now being tested to see if it can be effective in predicting criminality in women. The article by Dr Beatriz Jesus, Dr Ângela Maia, Dr Beatriz Barqueiro, Dr Tânia Gonçalves and Dr Hugo S. Gomes (in this special issue) presents some preliminary results of a study focusing on the evaluation of ICAP theory in a sample ($n = 491$) of female and male participants from a public school in the central region of Portugal, and a forensic sample from four juvenile detention centres. The results show that aggressive and anti-system attitudes significantly predict delinquent behaviour. While gender moderated the relationship between antisocial attitudes and nonviolent crime, it was not relevant for violent crime, suggesting that ICAP theory may need to be adapted when assessing its applicability to female offenders, but also has significant implications for juvenile crime prevention and intervention strategies.

Professor David P. Farrington has always focused on high quality, evidence-based research in criminology. By accurately assessing risk and investing in protective factors, we can, as Professor David P. Farrington puts it, prevent (or save) people from a life of crime. Professor David P. Farrington has used criminology to get to the roots of crime and as Bertrand Russell said, «the greatest challenge to any thinker is stating the problem in a way that will allow a solution».

Professor David P. Farrington continues to be with us and work with us, because everything we know it has been learnt through his mentorship and supervision.

Georgia Zara, Henriette Bergström, Darrick Jolliffe
Cambridge, Derby, London, August, 2025