

Probation & Welfare Service

Assessing the Risk of Re-offending



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In preparing Pre-sanction reports Probation Officers undertake an assessment of the risk posed to the public by an offender. This involves an assessment of the likelihood that the offender will re-offend. As part of a policy of improving our service to the courts, and in line with other Probation and Correctional Services throughout the world, Probation Officers in Ireland use an assessment tool known as The Level of Service Inventory – Revised (LSI-R) to help them make more accurate assessments of the likelihood that an offender will re-offend. The LSI-R also forms an important part of assessments and reviews undertaken as part of any subsequent supervision of offenders.

The LSI-R has been developed from an extensive body of international research and has been shown to predict the likelihood of adult recidivism in criminal jurisdictions throughout the world.

Over the past fifteen years there has been an increasing consensus amongst criminal justice professionals, academics and researchers about the factors that contribute to offending behaviour. This has provided a theoretical framework that now informs much of the work undertaken in criminal justice settings. The LSI-R uses this theoretical and research framework to provide a structured approach to assessment of risk.

The Structure of the LSI-R

Probation Officers are required to address risk factors under the following headings or sections:

- Criminal History
- Education and Employment
- Financial management
- Family
- Accommodation
- Use of leisure
- Companions
- Alcohol and Drug use
- Mental Health
- Attitudes

About one third of the questions relate to historical factors such as educational performance, work record, and whether the offender has a history of alcohol or drug abuse. These factors are known as static risk factors. The remainder of the questions focus on risk factors that are current and related to an individual's lifestyle attitudes and behaviour. These are known as dynamic risk factors and can change. Examples are situations in relation to employment, use of alcohol and drugs and attitudes to offending. These are the risk factors that can be targeted by Probation Officers during supervision as they attempt to reduce the risk posed by the offender.

The LSI-R in effect structures the assessment undertaken by Probation Officers and ensures that all offenders are assessed in relation to key potential areas of risk. An important element in the process is the assessment of the offender's attitudes and values and those held by others with whom they may come into contact. The evidence shows that offenders who hold antisocial or criminal attitudes and who associate with like-minded friends, family members or work colleagues are at particular risk of reoffending. The LSI-R therefore places heavy emphasis on the assessment of attitudes.

Use of the LSI-R

Probation Officers will use the LSI-R to support assessments made in the preparation of pre-sanction reports. The result of the test will help Probation Officers advise the Court as to whether an offender is at low, moderate, high or very high risk of reoffending. In the case of moderate, high and very high risk offenders the test will indicate the areas of dynamic risk that need to be addressed if the risk is to be reduced. In cases of low risk the Court might opt for a sanction that does not involve supervision by the Probation Service.

If an offender is subject to probation supervision the LSI-R will form an important part of the supervision planning process and the review of subsequent progress. Research has demonstrated that if a probationer is retested during supervision and a reduction in the LSI-R score is found, it is highly likely that actual reductions in offending behaviour will occur. Equally an increase in LSI-R scores on retest is highly likely to result in an increased risk of reoffending.

This information will become critical in helping Probation Officers make decisions about how they work with individual offenders and in measuring the effectiveness of the work they do.

The LSI-R is designed for use with adult offenders. A version of the instrument designed specifically for use with young offenders is also being used by Probation Officers who are required to work with younger offenders. This is known as the YLS/CMI.

The LSI-R does not adequately assess the risk posed by most categories of sex offenders. The risk factors relating to sex offenders differ significantly from those tested in the LSI-R. The LSI-R also does not predict adequately for domestic violence. Again the risk factors that need to be assessed differ significantly from those tested by LSI-R.

Risk assessments designed specifically sex offenders and domestic violence offenders are available and will be introduced eventually into practice in the service.
