Reflecting on risk and prediction: how relevant criminological research is (not) used by those faced with predicting reoffending

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Introduction

In 2025, an interviewee for my research project on school responses to sexual abuse between students told me that he had been threatened by many young people. Thankfully, he did not experience physical violence. We briefly discussed the question of how society might be able to predict which young people may enact their violent threats and which ones are making empty threats, and how this risk can be managed if it is identified. This topic of predicting future offending by young people has been present in much of my research and working life. It also seems likely to become more socially pressing in light of the potentially zeitgeist-setting Netflix show *Adolescence*. This show focuses on an apparently average teenage boy who commits murder after being exposed to harmful social messages on- and offline. The story raises questions about what sets violent offenders apart from other young people, and how society should understand and respond to the warning signs.

The following reflections are based on my own work experiences and academic learning. While I hesitate to claim wider applicability, I conclude that attempts outside academia to predict the risk of reoffending often have a complex relationship with criminological research, demanding concrete answers that academic research struggles to provide, and often hesitating to engage with what research is available.

Context

My journey with managing and predicting the risk of reoffending began with working in a Disclosure and Baring Service (DBS) unit, judging the relevance of non-conviction data to checks made by employers to assess the suitability and safety of potential employees. Such a power is meant to be carefully regulated by a framework regarding what information should be considered relevant. Much of this process entails trying to predict future behaviour based on past behaviour. This is an

area which social scientists have long been researching (e.g. Lussier and Healey, 2009; Moffit, 1993; Yu et al. 2022).

I encountered this research when I returned to academic study to do a part-time criminology master's. My study for this degree covered competing theories and explanations of why young people get into crime and how they might get out; modules on risk and youth justice; and a dissertation on young people creating and sharing sexual images and whether they will go on to further sexual offending. The challenge of predicting which abusive individuals may go on to commit future harms remains relevant to my current research into safeguarding responses to sexual abuse between secondary school students.

What I Learnt from Criminology

In response to the question discussed in the interview, I said that predicting harmful behaviour is complicated. While most adult offenders (including sex offenders) start young, over time most young offenders will desist (Cooley, 2022; Moffit, 1993: 690). The main academic debate concerns the role of treatment and if desistance will occur without it (Chaffin et al., 2002; Cooley, 2022; Worling and Curwen, 2000). The causes of both criminal behaviour and desistance remain debated, with varied social and biological explanations being proposed, including social attachment, imitation, and neuropsychological issues (e.g. Moffit, 1993; Sampson and Laub, 1990). Even the extent to which early onset offending might indicate long-term risk remains uncertain (Farrington, 2003: 225-226; Moffit, 1993). All of this means that, when it comes to specific individuals, there is great uncertainty.

How Useful Can Criminology Be?

Predicting future criminal risk is a key part of what is often termed a risk society, one that prioritises safety and uses control to achieve it (Ashworth and Zedner, 2014: 132-135; Giddens and Pierson, 1998: 209; Mythen, 2014: 49-57). However, prediction is difficult, and many risk assessment tools negate the role and place of the individual (supposedly the focus of UK justice) by using wider population models (Ashworth and Zedner, 2014: 184; Wandall, 2006). The DBS intends to provide an appropriate balance between managing the specific risk posed by individuals to society and the need to respect their rights. Based on my experience of working in the DBS, while there appeared to be less emphasis on the wider population models of prediction, there was still a desire to create certainty in the context of uncertainty.

We might expect that the DBS would seek to work closely with academia in order to commission, understand, and apply the latest research on reoffending. However, in my experience, this was not the case. Though this might have been due to a lack of time and funding, I wondered whether the uncertainty that academic debate provokes was unhelpful given the service's desire

for certainty. While risk prediction tools are often grounded in empirical evidence, even statistical data about population level probabilities can be conflicting; more nuanced and ideographic research provides even less clarity (Parfitt and Alleyne, 2020; Plummer 2001: 154). In many ways, academic study embraces uncertainty, which does not help those already confronted by it and seeking certainty.

I was never trained at work to apply the academic research and evidence that I encountered during my masters' degree. Instead, the framework the DBS used to addressed the issue of reoffending focused on what it was "reasonable" to assume, which was a very different approach to that taken in criminological research. Indeed, the only research I saw cited related to the "MacDonald triad" where bedwetting, arson, and animal cruelty were noted as precursors to violence and sexual sadism (Parfitt and Alleyne, 2020: 300). This meant that cases of arson had to be referred for further consideration, regardless of scale and impact. Although other offences, including animal cruelty, also had to be referred for further consideration, the logic behind these seemed more obvious to me. The "MacDonald triad" was the only reason why minor arson was referred. When seeking to verify this risk, I struggled to find current academic studies to support the assertions. Eventually I found that research in this area was complicated and contested (Parfitt and Alleyne, 2020: 303-304). Many studies questioned the validity of this link and brought up other risk factors (e.g. O'Ciardha, 2015; Prentky and Carter, 1984) and even the studies which tentatively supported it challenged the initial idea of the triad (Joubert et al. 2021, Parfitt and Alleyne, 2020). Fortunately, the guiding DBS framework made sure that the consideration of information pertaining to arson was proportionate. Ironically, a former colleague told me that arson was subsequently removed from the list of things needing automatic further consideration around the time that academic opinion was reengaging with the idea of arson as a possible warning of future harmful behaviour.

Conclusion

Reflecting on my experiences at the DBS through an academic lens, I am forced to wonder if the worlds of non-academic risk prediction, and criminological research as they are currently practised, struggle to engage in the needed dialogue with each other. The only response I could give when my interviewee brought up the question of prediction was that the issue was "complicated", and this complexity was not useful to the DBS. With the country potentially embarking upon another discussion of predicting future offending by young people, my experience leaves me worried that criminological research will struggle to contribute to policy and practice debates without major simplification that undermines the nuance in their findings.

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