



# Research at a glance

## Recidivism Risk Assessment for Aboriginal Males: A Brief Review of the Scientific Literature

**KEY WORDS:** *Aboriginal offenders, risk, actuarial measures of criminal risk, recidivism*

### Why we did this study

Correctional staff around the world use empirically-based actuarial risk assessment instruments to assess the risk offenders pose to public safety, to guide release decisions, and to choose treatment targets for individual offenders. Traditionally, these risk assessment instruments (RAI's) have not been used with Aboriginal offenders because they were not originally validated on Aboriginal samples. Over time, scientific data have become available indicating that some RAI's appear to predict recidivism equally well for Aboriginal offenders as for non-Aboriginal offenders. The current paper reviews the most researched risk assessment tools to assess their appropriateness for Aboriginal offenders.

### What we did

A profile of CSC offenders from four cultural groups is presented along with a general review of the literature on the development of RAI's. Studies on risk assessment tools applied to other Aboriginal cultures such as the Maori of New Zealand and the Aborigines of Australia are taken into consideration. We then searched the literature for well-researched risk assessment instruments that have been tested on samples of Aboriginal offenders. Finally, these instruments were compared in relation to applicable theory and empirical results.

### What we found

Aboriginal offenders are disproportionately represented within the Canadian federal correctional population compared to their representation in the Canadian population. The scientific literature shows that when clinical judgement alone is used to evaluate potential risk, even experienced professionals consistently overestimate risk. Hence, if clinical judgment is used to assess risk for Aboriginal offenders it is possible that a higher percentage of these offenders will be assessed as high risk. RAI's are reliable, transparent, and replicable risk assessment while clinical judgment has been found to predict at little better than chance levels. This review found that most known indicators of risk predict equally well for Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. Given that the factors related to criminal recidivism are the same across cultural groups, the paper concludes

that there are no theoretical or practical reasons to assume RAI's would not predict for Aboriginal offenders. Seven established RAI's were found that demonstrate predictive ability in Aboriginal samples.

### What it means

Currently available risk assessment instruments would be effective in providing valid risk assessments for Aboriginal offenders. These assessments inform the correctional plan by pointing to the appropriate level of intensity of service required to address risk and do not prohibit correctional staff from taking into account unique cultural factors in the delivery of correctional interventions. The implementation of selected structured risk assessment tools should coincide with a program of research validating these measures on federally-sentenced Aboriginal groups. Empirically-based risk assessment instruments, as part of a comprehensive risk management process, are likely to contribute to positive correctional outcomes.

### For more information

Harris, A. J. R., Cousineau, C., Pagé, C. A., Sonnichsen, P., & Varrette, S. (2011). *Recidivism Risk Assessment for Aboriginal Males: A Short Review of the Scientific Literature*. Research Report R-239. Ottawa: Correctional Service Canada.

To obtain a PDF version of the full report, contact the following address: [research@csc-scc.gc.ca](mailto:research@csc-scc.gc.ca)

**Prepared by:** Andrew J. R. Harris, Ph.D., C. Psych.

### Contact

Research Branch  
(613) 995-3975  
[research@csc-scc.gc.ca](mailto:research@csc-scc.gc.ca)

