

# Public perceptions of offender dangerousness – Views of young adults in the UK

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**PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF OFFENDER DANGEROUSNESS - VIEWS OF YOUNG  
ADULTS IN THE UK**

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# **PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF OFFENDER DANGEROUSNESS - VIEWS OF YOUNG ADULTS IN THE UK**

## **Abstract**

Much has been written about the fear of crime experienced by the public, but less is understood about the public perceptions of what constitutes a dangerous offender. This experimental study explores this issue using conjoint analysis -an innovative methodological approach in criminology. Analysis using a random effects ordinal logistic regression model allowed determination of those factors deemed by young adults to be of relevance to the assessment and management of dangerous offenders. The significant factors identified as relevant to perceptions of dangerousness and the need to monitor such offenders closely were: schizophrenia, a previous history of a sexual conviction, a violent conviction or robbery. The victim target group was also relevant. Using the research methodologies described, it was possible to demonstrate that in making these decisions, young adults are able to apply a systematic approach to discriminate between a range of risk factors.

143 words

Keywords: Risk assessment, dangerousness, violent offenders, ordinal regression, random effects, conjoint analysis

# **PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF OFFENDER DANGEROUSNESS - VIEWS OF YOUNG ADULTS IN THE UK**

## **Background**

Worry about violent crime in the UK is high. The fear of being the victim of crime is known to far outweigh the actual risk that a person faces (Hale, 1996). Gender differences in the fear of crime have been identified, with women reporting greater levels than men (Hale 1996, Gilchrist et al 1998, Stanko 2000), despite men being at greater risk of being the victim of crime than women (Walklate 2000). Gilchrist et al (1998) have suggested that this difference may be due to women's ability to communicate the fears they have, more openly than men. Others note that crimes against women, such as rape and domestic violence, are both under-reported and under-convicted and this leads to an underestimation of the actual experience of crime towards women, which if acknowledged, would suggest that women's fear is not out of proportion to their actual experience of it (Mirrlees-Black and Byron, 1999, Stanko 2000).

This concern about violent crime continues today. Our reanalysis of the 2005/6 British Crime Survey<sup>1</sup> identified that an estimated 35% of individuals in England and Wales are very or fairly worried about being physically attacked by strangers, and 36% are similarly worried about being mugged and robbed. The group with the

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<sup>1</sup> A weighted analysis of the 2005/6 British Crime Survey using individual weights was carried out to estimate England and Wales population percentages. The dataset is available from the UK data archive.

highest concern was the youngest female group, with an estimated 55% of the population aged between 16-24 feeling very or fairly worried about physical attack by strangers, and 47% similarly worried about being mugged and robbed. Nearly half of this age group (49%) were also very or fairly worried about being raped.

From a criminal justice perspective, those offenders who pose the greatest concern, do so because of the range of risks they present (Wood 2006). Decisions about how best to manage such risks are made in England and Wales via the Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) which were implemented as part of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000. The Multi-Agency Public Protection process requires the Police and Probation Service to bring together a range of agencies to assess and manage violent and sexual offenders. Three categories of offender are managed under these arrangements. The first category consists of registered sex offenders (those sex offenders who are required to sign the sex offender register). Next, there are violent and other sex offenders (i.e. those not required to register) who have been sentenced to twelve months or more in custody. The final category consists of other offenders who have a conviction for an offence which indicates they are capable of causing serious harm to the public.

In terms of dangerousness and risk, a three-level structure of risk management for these offenders has been put in place.

- Level One arrangements exist for those offenders who can be effectively managed by one agency.

- Level Two arrangements are for those cases where the active involvement of two agencies and consultation with additional agencies is required to effectively manage risk.
- Level Three arrangements are for those offenders for whom a range of agencies needs to be actively involved because of the complexities and seriousness of the risks posed.

Level three arrangements exist to manage the highest risk offenders. These are defined by the Home Office as offenders which present risks that can only be “managed by a plan which requires close co-operation at a senior level due to the complexity of the case and/or because of the unusual resource commitments it requires” (National Probation Directorate, 2003). Alternatively and exceptionally, Level 3 arrangements are also put in place for cases with a high likelihood of media scrutiny and/or public interest and where there is a need to ensure that public confidence in the criminal justice system is sustained.

Decisions regarding the management of an offender under the MAPPAs, take account of a range of additional factors to those described above. Such decision-making relies on the professional judgement of the criminal justice agencies involved. From a criminal justice perspective two factors underpin assessments of risk - risk of reconviction and risk of serious harm to others. Serious harm relates to the impact or consequences of an offence for a victim.

Of interest in this paper is whether the general public for whom this arrangement is said to exist to protect, would concur with the decisions made. Previous research has

identified two classes of offender which the general public consider to be particularly dangerous; those with mental health problems and sex offenders. Appelbaum (2001) identifies the mentally disordered as of disproportionate concern amongst the public. Pescosolido et al (1999) provide evidence of this from the US with an analysis of the Mental Health module of the 1996 General Household Survey. Over 33% of respondents thought that an individual with a major depressive illness was likely to do something violent to someone else; this rose to 60% when considering those diagnosed with schizophrenia. This issue has recently gained more media interest in the UK with the publication of the Appleby report, which identified that one person a week in England and Wales is killed by an offender with mental health problems (Appleby et al., 2006). The second group of offenders which researchers have identified of particular public concern are sex offenders. West (2000) identifies that there is a strong public demand, driven partly by media pressure, for punitive sanctions against those who offend against children. The influx of sex offender specific legislation is a further indication of the perceived need to monitor this offender group closely in order to enhance public protection procedures (for example the Sexual Offences Act 2003).

Our aim in this paper is to explore the views of young adults as to what constitutes a dangerous offender. The young adults we have targeted are those embarking on a criminology degree, While they may be deemed to have a greater than average interest in crime and justice, they have relatively limited knowledge of harm and risk assessment and recent legislation. Specifically, we are interested in the following research questions:

1. Are young adults rating offenders with mental illness and those convicted of child sex offences above other offenders in relation to perceived dangerousness?
2. Are young adults able to take a multi- factorial approach in considering risk and dangerousness of offenders, or do they focus on only one or two dimensions?
3. Which risk dimensions are most important in considering offender dangerousness?
4. Are there differences in perception in offender dangerousness between males and females, and between those with experience of the criminal justice system, and those without?

## **Method**

A convenience sample of 68 first year undergraduate Criminology students at Lancaster University took part in this study. All the students were given a short lecture style presentation on the work of MAPPA in order to provide some context for the experiments, but also to ensure a shared understanding of the different risk management levels within these arrangements. They were provided with a definition of a risk factor as a factor that will, in their view, increase the possibility of the offender committing an offence of serious harm to a victim. The participants were then asked to complete two experiments. Background information on their gender, age and whether or not they had had previous experience of the criminal justice



system was also collected. For the previous experience question, the student was asked to consider a range of possible contacts with the criminal justice service, such as an employee, volunteer or through a family member, as well as personally, either as a victim or suspect.

### *Experiment one*

This experiment was designed to address the first research question. The participants were presented with a list of 13 risk factors derived from a review of cases managed under the MAPPA level three arrangements (Wood 2006) and were asked to rate on a scale of 0-4 the extent to which they felt each risk factor was relevant to an assessment of dangerousness. The following scale was provided:

0 = The risk factor is not relevant to the assessment of dangerousness

1 = The risk factor is relevant to the assessment of dangerousness to a small extent.

2 = The risk factor is relevant to the assessment of dangerousness to a moderate extent.

3 = The risk factor is relevant to the assessment of dangerousness to a great extent.

4 = The risk factor is crucial/very highly relevant to the assessment of dangerousness.

### *Experiment Two*

To answer the remaining research questions, we adopted an experimental conjoint analysis approach. Conjoint analysis is a methodology with its roots in mathematical psychology (Green and Srinivasan, 1978). It is most commonly used in marketing studies to estimate the importance or weighting ascribed to each of a collection of characteristics or a product. Studies using conjoint analysis for risk assessment have

mostly been carried out in the financial (Bontempo et al., 1997) and health sectors. For example, Sassi et al. (2005) used conjoint analysis to investigate patient preferences for cardiac risk assessment methods. Conjoint analysis also allow individual characteristics as well as product characteristics to be assessed and controlled for.

Each student was given 6 different case studies to consider, with each case study represented a profile of a possible dangerous offender. Each case study comprised of 6 background variables related to the offender (Wood, 2006), with each variable comprising a number of levels, as shown in Table 1. . The gender of the offender was always assumed to be male. Every case study was distinct in that at least one of the risk factors was different for each case study presented within the set presented to a student, and the set of case studies were different for each student. The number of levels of each of the risk factors allowed for 648 ( $3 \times 3 \times 4 \times 3 \times 3 \times 2$ ) different case studies.

An important part of a conjoint analysis study is randomisation. With small numbers of participants there is the need to carefully choose a subset for each participant following good experimental design principles; incomplete block designs are often used. to ensure that all main effects are estimable (Green and Srinivasan, 1978). However, with 68 participants, there are potentially  $68 \times 6 = 408$  different case studies which could be used. We decided to allocate a different set of case studies to each student, and therefore a random allocation algorithm assigned a different subset of six case studies to each student, selecting from the 648 case studies available without replacement.

For each case study, the student was asked to choose one response from the following three ordered options:

- The person requires minimal/no monitoring.
- The person requires some monitoring but not at the highest level
- The person requires monitoring at the very highest level

**Table 1: The offender background variables used in the conjoint analysis risk assessment.**

<b>Variable field</b>	<b>Description of the levels of each variable</b>
Age	(i) 18, (ii) 30, (iii) 45
Mental health status	(i) no mental health issues, (ii)schizophrenic, (iii) personality disorder
Previous serious convictions	(i) no previous convictions (ii) previous violence conviction (iii) previous sexual conviction (iv) previous robbery conviction
Accommodation status	(i) lives alone (ii) lives with partner (iii) lives with parents
Primary target victim group	(i) targets children (ii) targets adult females (iii) targets adult males
Prior custody	(i) prior custody (ii) no prior custody

## Analysis

The information derived from the rating exercise (experiment 1) was analysed by looking at the mean rating of each risk item, and also by examining the proportion of individuals ranking risk items in the highest and lowest category. For the case study exercise (experiment 2), the analysis was more complex. A variety of methods have been used in the past to analyse data from conjoint analysis experiments. We chose to model the data using ordinal logistic regression (see for example, Agresti, 1984), which could deal with the ordinal nature of the response. In addition we extended the standard model by incorporating a random individual effect, to allow and control for individual level variation.

Specifically, we model the probability that for a particular case study  $i$  for student  $j$ , the response category  $y_{ij}$  is greater than  $k$ , where  $k$  is 1 or 2. The model has the form:

$$\text{logit}(\text{prob}(y_{ij} > k)) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_{1ij} + \beta_2 x_{2ij} + \dots + \beta_p x_{pij} + z_j - c_k$$

where there are  $p$  explanatory variables  $x_{1ij} \dots x_{pij}$  (some of which will be dummy variables representing the levels of the explanatory factors) and  $p+1$  parameters  $\beta_0, \beta_1 \dots \beta_p$ . The term  $z_j$  represents an individual random effect for individual  $j$ , which is assumed to come from a normal distribution with zero mean and variance  $\tau^2$ . Finally the parameters  $c_k$  represent two cut points in the model that allow for a different intercept depending on whether predicted values for  $k=1$  or  $k=2$  are required.

To fit this model, we used the `gllamm` procedure in STATA. The method is fully described in Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal (2005). The response model was built by including two types of explanatory variables: respondent effects (gender and prior exposure to the criminal justice system) and case study or offender effects (age of

offender, mental health status, prior serious offending; accommodation status, primary victim group and prior custody).

Significance of particular explanatory terms in the model (both respondent and offender effects) was tested by temporarily excluding that term from the model, and carrying out a likelihood ratio test. The change in deviance (or minus twice the log-likelihood) was compared to a chi-squared distribution with the relevant degrees of freedom, and p-values for each excluded term obtained. The estimates of the  $\beta$  parameters allowed the direction of effects to be measured. Exponentiating the estimates converts them into odds ratios and gives them a greater interpretability.

## **Results**

We first focus on the sample. Forty-seven (70%) of the 68 students were female and 21 (30%) were male. Most of the students (97%) were aged between 18 and 20, with the remaining two aged 25 and 26. Most of the students (70%) had no previous contact with the criminal justice system. Of the 21 who had, nine had a family member employed within the criminal justice system, and five had voluntary experience of the criminal justice system. The remaining students had either been a victim of crime (3 students), had a family member with a criminal record (2 students), or were employed by the criminal justice system (2 students).

### *The rating exercise*

Table 2 shows the mean rating for each risk factor, with the risk factors listed in order of these mean ratings. It also identifies the risk factors identified by students as 'very highly relevant' (category 4) and 'not at all relevant' (category 0) to assessments of

dangerousness; it also shows the mean rating for each risk factor. We can identify that a sexual assault on a child was identified as 'very highly relevant' by the majority of students (82%), followed by threats to kill a child (75%). Child abduction was identified as very highly relevant by fewer numbers of students (25%). For adult victims, however, a violent assault and threats to kill were seen as more relevant to assessments of dangerousness than a sexual assault. However violent assault seems to have been perceived as violence outside the home, as domestic violence was only identified in 21% of cases as very highly relevant.

There were statistically significant gender differences between two of the risk factors. Women rated a threat to kill a child as very highly relevant more frequently than men ( $\chi^2=8.55$  on 3df;  $p= 0.036$ ). Likewise a threat to kill an adult was perceived by more women than men to be more highly relevant ( $\chi^2=9.74$  on 4df;  $p=0.045$ ). In addition to identifying the risks that were most relevant, students were also asked to rate the risk factors that they believed had no relevance to risk assessment. This is shown in Table 2:

**Table 2: Risk factors for dangerousness: mean ratings, and the proportion of respondents identifying each risk factor as ‘very highly relevant’ or ‘not at all relevant’**

Risk factor	Mean score rating (N=68)	Percentage rating as very highly relevant (%)	Percentage rating as not at all relevant (%)
Sexual assault/child victim	3.79	82.4	0.0
Violence/child victim	3.68	70.6	0.0
Threats to kill a child	3.65	75.0	0.0
Sexual assault/adult	3.50	55.9	0.0
Threats to kill an adult	3.47	64.7	1.5
Threats to kill staff	3.31	52.9	1.5
Risk of domestic violence	3.00	20.6	0.0
Violence/adult victim	2.84	20.6	1.5
Threats to abduct a child	2.81	25.0	0.0
Person refuses to sign the sex offender register	2.81	25.0	1.5
Person is a chaotic substance misuser	2.81	20.6	0.0
Person has a mental illness	2.81	16.2	0.0
Refusal to address offending behaviour	2.79	30.9	2.9
Person has a personality disorder	2.76	19.1	0.0
Refusal to comply with probation requirements	2.69	17.6	1.5
Family is collusive	2.57	19.1	0.0
Person is at risk of self harm/suicide	2.41	13.2	7.4



*The case study experiment*

We first fitted a random effects ordinal regression model to the three category response including all explanatory factors, and an individual random effects term. We then removed each explanatory factor from the model in turn and examined the change in minus twice the log likelihood to determine the significance of each factor. The aim of this part of the analysis for this stage was to identify which of a set of risk factors presented simultaneously in a case study format appears to be the most pertinent in terms of influencing decisions about risk and dangerousness amongst this student group. The results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Significance of explanatory factors in the case study exercise**

Term removed	-2 log L	Degrees of freedom (df)	Change in -2 log L from main effects model	Change in df	p-value
<b>1. Individual factors</b>					
(a) Gender	560.95	386	0.21	1	0.64
(b) Prior experience of criminal justice system	564.52	386	3.78	1	0.05
<b>2. Offender factors</b>					
(a) Age of offender	561.39	387	0.65	2	0.72
(b) Mental health status	602.26	387	41.52	2	<0.001
(c) Previous serious conviction status	691.97	388	131.23	3	<0.001
(d) Accommodation status	570.06	387	9.32	2	0.009
(e) Target victim group	610.65	387	49.91	2	<0.001
(f) Prior custody status	596.64	386	35.90	1	<0.001

Note: The full main effects model has a value of -2 log L of 560.74 on 385 df

We can first identify that, of the six dimensions of offender risk presented to the students, five showed significant differences in influencing the response to the monitoring question. It therefore appears that our group of young adults are not adopting a simplistic approach to risk, but are attempting to take account of all information presented to them in the case studies. The five significant risk factors can be ordered in importance by looking at the average change in minus twice the log-likelihood per degree of freedom. The most important factor was a previous serious conviction status (i.e. whether the offender had prior convictions for a violent offence, a sexual offence or a robbery offence). The second most important factor was prior custody status (with a change in  $-2 \log l$  of 35.9 on only 1 df); that is, whether the offender had spent time in custody. This was followed by two risk factors of roughly equal importance – mental health status and victim group targeted. Of lesser importance, but still influencing the judgement of the students was where the offender was living. The only risk factor deemed not to be important by the students was the age of the offender.

Table 3 also reports whether student characteristics influence the leniency or severity of the judgement made. Of the two characteristics in the analysis, we see that the respondent's gender has little effect whereas prior experience of the criminal justice system does influence judgement.

So far, we have identified factors important to perceptions of the need for close monitoring of an individual who poses a risk of harm, and we now need to look at the

direction and magnitude of these effects. Table 4 shows the parameter estimates in the form of odds ratios and their associated confidence intervals.

**Table 4: Odds ratios for each risk factor and associated confidence interval**

	Odds ratio	95% confidence interval for Odds Ratio		p- value
<b>Individual/respondent risk factors</b>				
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	1.000			
Male	1.257	.477	3.314	0.644
<b>Previous history of the Criminal Justice System</b>				
Yes	1.000			
No	2.599	.982	6.881	0.055
<b>Offender risk factors</b>				
<b>Age</b>				
Age:18	1.000			
Age: 30	1.072	.586	1.961	0.821
Age: 45	1.274	.696	2.334	0.432
<b>Mental illness:</b>				
No issues	1.000			
Schizophrenic	7.734	3.962	15.120	>0.001
Personality disorder	2.316	1.256	4.275	0.007
<b>Previous serious conviction</b>				
None	1.000			
Prior violence	18.935	8.696	41.230	<0.001
Prior sexual assault	76.164	28.829	201.216	<0.001
Prior robbery	3.396	1.697	6.795	0.001
<b>Accommodation status</b>				
Lives with parents	1.000			
Lives alone	2.632	1.378	5.027	0.003
Lives with partner	1.854	0.997	3.447	0.051
<b>Target victim group</b>				
Adult males	1.000			
Children	10.073	4.985	20.354	<0.001
Adult Females	3.887	2.106	7.175	<0.001
<b>History of custody</b>				
Prior custody	1.000			
No prior custody	4.697	2.734	8.056	<0.001

We first examine the offender risk factors. For previous conviction history, by far the largest odds ratio is having a prior sexual conviction - this multiplies the odds of being in the highest monitoring category by over 75 times compared to no prior convictions. A prior violence conviction also increases the odds dramatically by nearly 20 times, and robbery by over three times. A custodial record also is influential on being in the highest category, increasing the odds by over four times.

The next most important variable is the target victim group. Offenders targeting children are judged to be far more dangerous than those targeting adult males, increasing the odds of being in the highest risk category by over 10 times. Those targeting females are also viewed as more dangerous than those targeting male victims.

In terms of mental health, the presence of schizophrenia substantially increases the odds of being viewed as dangerous, with the diagnosis of a personality disorder also increasing the odds but to a lesser degree.

Finally, those living alone are viewed with more suspicion than those living with a partner or with parents.

In examining the individual factors, we can again see that the gender of the respondent has no effect. However, those with experience of the criminal justice system tend to be less harsh in their judgement, being less likely to judge any offender as dangerous, compared to those with no experience.

## Discussion and Conclusions

We first consider the merits of the methodologies used. We set out to explore if young adults are able to take a multi- factorial approach in considering risk and dangerousness. Experiment 1 shows how the individual factors were rated when considered by the respondents in isolation from other risk factors. Experiment 2 assessed perceptions of risk using a more sophisticated model which is more closely aligned to the actual MAPPA process, with a number of risk factors being considered to determine the need for monitoring. The young adults in this study demonstrated an ability to follow through a similar process, rather than making decisions in a simplistic way. We set out to examine which risk dimensions were deemed most important to offender dangerousness and in doing so, identified five dimensions:

- Previous conviction for a sexual or violent offence
- Prior custody status
- Victim group targeted
- Mental illness
- Residential status

### *Previous serious conviction*

The odds of an individual being classified as risky are 76 times greater for a sexual offence and 18 times greater for a violent offence. A robbery increased the odds by 3 times. Thus, for these young adults, specific offence types in the offenders' history influenced their perceptions of dangerousness. In particular, a previous sexual assault was seen as significantly more important than other risk factors, to assessments of the need to closely monitor an individual.

In terms of media portrayal, it is perhaps violent and sexual behaviour that receives the highest profile. Sexual crimes, particularly those involving children, though not reported in the media on every occurrence, have the capacity to dominate newspaper headlines and influence public opinion (Soothill and Walby, 1991). This heightened awareness of the prevalence of sexual crime against children and the apparent fear amongst females that they may be the victim of rape (Crime Survey, 2005/6), may have played a part in these student's perceptions of dangerousness. However, of note is that there were no gender differences in the responses provided.

Although a violent conviction was seen as presenting raised odds of dangerousness, only a fifth of the young adults viewed domestic violence as highly relevant to assessments of dangerousness. Given national statistics indicating that two women a week die as a result of domestic violence, such a discrepancy is interesting. The perceptions may in part relate to media portrayals which continue to report and give a higher profile to sexual assaults much more frequently than to domestic violence.

#### *Previous custodial sentence*

A previous custodial conviction (with the offence not specified) raised the odds of being on a higher monitoring category by four-fold. Thus these young adults made an assumption that an individual who had been in custody previously was more likely to re-offend dangerously than an individual who had no prior history. This assumption is in part supported by the national statistics that suggest a re-conviction rate of 58% within two years of release from custody (Prime, 2002). However, the extent to which the offence leading to the re-conviction would be classed as dangerous and thus

requiring the close monitoring indicated by these young adults is less easily established as this is not information captured by national statistics.

*Victim group targeted*

In experiment 1, the young adults were asked to rate risk factors according to how relevant they believed them to be in relation to dangerousness. We have shown that the type of victim targeted influenced perceptions, with the risk of sexual harm or threats to kill a child being rated by at least two thirds of the young adults as highly relevant. A different pattern emerged for adult victims, as a violent assault of an adult was seen as more highly relevant to assessments of dangerousness, than a sexual assault on an adult or a threat to kill.

This risk dimension suggested gender differences in perceptions of offender dangerousness. In the first experiment, a threat to kill an adult or child was the only risk factors to trigger significant gender differences. Women were more likely than men to deem this as highly relevant to assessments of dangerousness. Clearly, acting out such a threat would result in the most serious of consequences and thus from a lay-person's perspective, a threat to kill may be deemed extremely serious, though the young men in this study did not perceive it this way. In practice, such threats may frequently be made, but rarely will the person carry out such a threat. Wood (2006) identified a rate of around 29% of her sample of 186 high-risk offenders had made threats to kill. In practice none of these threats was carried out, within the follow-up period of two years. However, a threat to kill is perhaps indicative of an individual's capacity to be violent and to seriously harm another person rather than to actually kill and for this reason it would be deemed to be of significance to assessments of risk and

strategies to manage these. The reasons for the gender differences in perceptions of the seriousness of threats to kill can only be hypothesised. Possibly young male adults did not perceive the threat as being one that would be acted upon and thus did not view it as dangerous, whereas women may have perceived a statement of intent as sufficient evidence of the need to consider this risk factor as highly relevant to assessments of dangerousness.

### *Mental health problems*

Mental illness influenced perceptions of risk in both experiments, and our use of two different methodologies allowed us to gain different pictures of the effect of mental illness on dangerousness. Thus, only 16% of the young adults felt that mental illness was 'highly relevant' to assessments of dangerousness when considered as a stand alone factor in experiment 1. However, when considered in the case study format, this risk factor became highly significant. A person with schizophrenia had odds of being seen to require close monitoring, 73 times greater than someone without. Thus, it would appear that in addition to those with a history of sexual offending being rated as more dangerous than other offence types, the existence of a mental illness further influenced perceptions. The prevalence of mental illness amongst an offending population is well documented. A survey conducted by the Office for National Statistics (1998) provides baseline data on the psychiatric morbidity of male prisoners. The survey found that 40% of male prisoners had sought help for mental health problems and the prevalence of personality disorder was estimated to be 64%. The extent to which such a prevalence would be known by the young adults participating in this study may be influenced by media reporting. In recent years, mental health issues have received a high profile in the media following murders



committed by individuals with schizophrenia. Shaw et al. (1999) argue that the reports are disproportionate to the actual occurrence and suggest that organisations like the Zito Trust, set up in memory of a man killed by a person with schizophrenia had, despite its sensitivities, probably only served to disproportionately highlight the rare killings by mentally ill people. They suggest that murder at the hands of someone under the influence of drink or drugs is significantly more likely than being murdered by someone with schizophrenia, and that the media reports are misleading. Whilst the methodological difficulties in establishing accurate prevalence rates are recognised (Walsh, Buchanan and Fahy, 2002), the prevalence rate of schizophrenia is estimated to be between three to eight times greater amongst prisoners than in the general population (Teplin 1996, Eronen et al., 1996 and Wallace et al., 1998). Meehan et al.'s study (2006) showed that out of 1,594 people convicted of murder, a relatively small proportion, 85 (5%) had schizophrenia.

Assumptions that mental illness equates to criminal behaviour are wrong and damaging to the vast majority of individuals who suffer mental illness and do not engage in offending behaviour. However, when this risk factor exists alongside a number of other areas of concern, it was seen as highly significant by these young adults. Whilst these adults may not believe that someone with schizophrenia is at increased risk of committing a murder, they may believe they have an increased capacity to be violent in some way and this may influence their perception of dangerousness.

### *Accommodation status*

The case study identified that the young adult respondents perceived an individual to be more in need of monitoring if he lived alone than if he lived with his parents. Perhaps these young adults saw parents as a possible protective factor, in that the parents could fulfil a monitoring role, thus reducing the need for external agencies to increase the level of monitoring. For those living alone, the opportunity to engage in offending behaviour was perhaps seen as greater and for this reason these individuals were viewed with greater suspicion. In addition, those living alone can be viewed with suspicion – Demuth (2004) identifies the “popular stereotypes of loners ... as psychologically and emotionally unstable and capable of serious forms of delinquency.”

### *Other findings of note*

We were interested to examine whether prior experience of the criminal justice system would alter the responses made by respondents. 30% of these young adults had prior experience, 10 % of whom had been directly employed by the service either voluntary or as a paid employee, with around 15% having indirect experience via family members who were employed by the service. Three of the young adults had been victims of crime. We found that those with experience, tended to be less harsh in their judgements, being less likely than those without experience to judge an offender as dangerous. With larger sample sizes it would be interesting to explore the extent to which the type of contact with the criminal justice service impacts on perceptions of dangerousness. For example, do victims of crime assess dangerousness differently to those who work as part of the criminal justice system? Possible reasons for the differences between those with experience and those without can only be speculated

at this stage, but it is an interesting finding and one which might have been predicted to have moved in the opposite direction. It suggests that rather than an insight into the criminal justice system heightening an awareness of potentially dangerous behaviours/risk factors, it modifies them and leads individuals to in effect downplay the potential significance of the information presented.

The other interesting finding in this study was that the majority of factors identified as significant to the need to monitor a case very closely, relate to factors that would be deemed of relevance to research-based assessments of risk of reconviction. Take, for example, the Offender Group Reconviction Scale, 2<sup>nd</sup> version (OGRS2). This is an assessment tool used by the Probation Service to assess the risk of reconviction over a two-year period (Taylor, 1999). The tool takes into account the individual's past history in order to predict the likelihood of a further conviction, based on reconviction rates of a group of offenders with similar characteristics to the individual. Factors such as a previous custodial history, a conviction for robbery and a conviction for a sexual and/or violent offence are all factors that are taken into account as part of the OGRS2 assessment. If present, these factors are proven to increase the likelihood of a reconviction over a subsequent two year period. These factors were identified by the young adults in this study as relevant to the need to increase the level of monitoring, indicating that they were able to identify factors that have a proven impact on the likelihood of a reconviction.

In summary, these findings indicate that the two methodologies utilised provide an effective means to explore perceptions of risk. It enabled consideration of the public's perception of risk and dangerousness, identifying those risk factors that are felt to be

significant and illustrated that the way in which risk information is presented, can influence perceptions of what constitutes dangerous behaviour. In particular, conjoint analysis is a neglected tool in risk perception which can help to provide insight in multi-factorial situations.

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