

# AN EVALUATION OF THE OFFENDER ASSESSMENT SYSTEM AS AN ASSESSMENT TOOL FOR THE NATIONAL PROBATION SERVICE

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## Abstract

*The intention of this research was to evaluate the Offender Assessment System (OASys) and to consider its role within the probation service. Primary research was conducted using the semi-structured interview in order to gain information on several areas of interest in relation to OASys. This included the length of time it takes to complete the assessment, any technical difficulties that occur, gender specific questions, the usefulness of OASys, the results and the relevancy of the information required. A snowball sample was used in order to gather the participants, which consisted of seven probation employees. An analysis of the primary and secondary research confirmed that there are a number of issues regarding the use of OASys within the probation service. In particular OASys was found to be time consuming and there were a variety of technological problems associated with using OASys. This has implications in terms of meeting deadlines and targets. In addition to this a few of the participants felt that OASys is more male orientated. This leads to the question of whether or not a standardised risk assessment tool can be used for both female and male offenders. A separate version of OASys designed especially for women may be more appropriate. Furthermore a number of the probation employees did not always think that the actuarial results of OASys were accurate. This finding contradicts the currently existing belief that actuarial assessments are better than clinical assessments. Additionally the primary research suggests that OASys is useful in terms of efficiency as it provides a faster process for court reports. Nevertheless it can be argued that this focus upon efficiency supports the idea that OASys is part of a bureaucratic process, which comes with its own set of problems.*

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### **Dedication**

I would very much like to dedicate this dissertation to my granddad who is sadly missed. He always offered encouragement as he always believed in me no matter what. I'm sorry he couldn't see me finish my time at Nottingham Trent University, but I hope I've made him proud.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would just like to say a great big thank you to those probation employees who took part in the research and to those who enabled the interviews to take place. This dissertation could not have happened without your contributions and knowledge.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Background of the study**

Risk within the clinical and criminal justice context is ‘primarily associated with negative outcomes rather than potential gains or losses’ (Kemshall *et al*, 1997:222). Unfavourable outcomes ‘of decisions about individuals made by legal bodies or institutional staff can include reoffending, clinical relapse, disruptive behaviour or suicide’ (Blackburn, 2000:177). The undesired outcome can also occur in relation to the risk of serious harm to others. The judgement that an individual may cause harm to others ‘influences legal decisions at a number of different stages within criminal and civil proceedings such as bail, sentencing and parole’ (Blackburn, 2000:177). Assessments of risk within the criminal justice system are carried out by professionals for reasons relating to institutional or community management (Blackburn, 2000). This focus upon risk and risk assessment has come about due to a shift in ideology within the criminal justice system and has had a huge influence on probation practice; public protection is now vital when dealing with offenders. This concept is based on the belief that offender managers and others within the criminal justice system should protect the public from the risk of serious harm posed by some offenders (Hancock, 2007). Thus the purpose of risk assessment is not simply to predict future harm it is also used to establish effective risk management. Risk management involves using a number of different interventions with an aim to reduce the likelihood of a risk occurring or to reduce the impact of the risk if it were to occur (Kemshall and Wood, 2007). Risk assessment and risk management are now crucial tasks within the Probation Service. OASys became the standard risk assessment tool used within the Probation service in 2001.

### **Aims and Objectives**

This study aims to evaluate the Offender Assessment System (OASys) as an assessment tool for the National Probation Service. In order to fulfil this objective the research will give consideration to;

- The length of time it takes to complete an OASys assessment
- The technical problems that occur when using OASys
- The relevancy of the information the assessment requires
- How accurate probation employees find the results of OASys to be
- The Usefulness of OASys
- Gender specific questions within OASys.

### **Structure of the study**

The following chapter will explore in further detail the background in which OASys developed. It will also explain what OASys is and what it intends to do. Furthermore previously published literature will outline some of the current problems that have been associated with the use of OASys.

Chapter three will introduce the primary research undertaken to complete this dissertation. It will explain why this method was chosen and will provide an overview of the benefits and limitations of using this approach.

Chapter four will present the findings of the primary research. It will identify the views and opinions of seven employees within the Probation Service in regard to the use of OASys.

Chapter five will discuss the specific themes that emerge from the research. Furthermore it will draw on comparisons and differences between the primary and secondary data.

The final chapter will provide the reader with a conclusion to the dissertation. The chapter will also offer a number of recommendations based on the primary and secondary research gathered during the project.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The Offender Assessment System (OASys) is a structured clinical risk assessment tool used by adult correctional services in England and Wales (Home Office, 2006). It is used to assess an offender's likelihood of reconviction, the factors associated with offending, and the risk of harm he or she presents (National Probation Service, 2003). The rise of risk within the criminal justice system is largely associated with the public protection agenda, which assumed dominance in the 1990s. Within the public protection model 'responsibility is placed upon offender managers and others to protect the public from the risk of serious harm posed by some offenders' (Hancock, 2007:246). OASys is relied upon within the public protection approach as it is used to determine future behaviour and future risk. Once the level of risk presented by an offender has been decided upon precautions are then put in place to manage that risk. Therefore OASys needs to be effective as it will have a huge impact on whether or not offenders are dealt with appropriately in the UK.

### **A shift from Advise, Assist and Befriend to a focus on Public Protection**

Traditionally probation values were embedded in Christian theology. The nineteenth-Century police court missionaries thought that they could reduce crime and the use of imprisonment by 'saving souls, denouncing sin and promoting temperance' (Nellis, 2007:239). McWilliams (1983, 1985, 1986 and 1987) believed that the police court missionaries 'were welcome in the courts because they provided justifications for magistrates who were increasingly concerned about the harsh effects of the cumulative principle in sentencing' (cited in Vanstone, 2004:36). This ideology was incorporated in some ways into the Probation of Offenders Act 1907, which considered the probation order as an alternative to punishment and defined its aim as 'advise, assist and befriend' (Nellis, 2007:239). However from the 1930's onwards the Probation service distanced itself from evangelical language. The post –World War Probation Service was based on liberal-humanitarianism, which focused on the idea that the 'character and behaviour of most individual offenders can be improved through education, treatment and therapy' (Nellis, 2007:239). However the Probation Service has now moved towards a new purpose which is to 'punish, help, change and control offenders' (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2006). This consolidates the other changes in recent years such as the establishment of a clear role to work with others to protect the public.

The public protection and community safety approach puts the protection of the public first and is 'characterised by the use of restrictions, surveillance, monitoring and control' (Kemshall, 2008:14). Sentencing within this model can be disproportionate to the offence as it is based upon assessments of future risk. The public protection model has emerged due to the fact that risk has become 'associated with loss, harm and danger' (Nash, 2010:60). People today are living in a 'culture of fear' and the Public Protection approach attempts to reassure the public of their safety (Nash, 2010:60). The public protection approach has been inflamed by two symbolic cases. The first was the abduction and murder of eight year old Sarah Payne by Roy Whiting a released sex offender (BBC, 2001). The second is the murders of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in 2002, by a man without previous convictions, but who had come to the attention of social services for a series of alleged offences including rape and sex with underage girls (BBC, 2004). The public want protecting from

dangerous offenders such as these men. Therefore in an attempt to do this the public protection system aims ‘to predict the unknown, to protect an often unknown individual from harm at some point in the future’ (Nash, 2010:63).

### **Risk Penology**

It is believed that we are currently witnessing a ‘fundamental rupture between modern and a new postmodern penality’ (Kemshall and Maguire, 2001:243). The end of the twentieth century saw growing discontent with the modernist penal agenda. ‘Modern penal practices were viewed as inadequate for the containment of crime, and their spread into the practices of welfare were seen as oppressive’ (Kemshall, 2003:16.). As a result of this a new postmodern penology has emerged. There are three key features of this new penology. The first is that the ‘moral or clinical description of the individual has been replaced with actuarial language of probabilistic calculations and statistical distributions applied to populations’ (Feeley and Simon, 1992:451). The second is that the new penology is not about punishing or rehabilitating individuals but it is about ‘identifying and managing unruly groups’ (Feeley and Simon: 1992:455). Therefore there is now the rationale of a managerial process. This means that the goal of the new penology is not to eliminate crime but is to make it tolerable through systematic coordination (Justice 4 victims, 2007). The third key feature of this new penology is that these ‘altered expectations have manifested themselves in the development of more cost-effective forms of custody and control and in new technologies to identify and classify risk’ (Feeley and Simon, 1992:457).

### **Risk within the Probation Service**

This risk penology is evident within the Probation Service as risk assessment and risk management are now core tasks for the Probation Service (Kemshall, 2007:274). An assessment of the risks posed by the offender is now a ‘mandatory requirement in a pre-sentence report; it also forms the basis for all of the services work with the offenders for whom it has a statutory responsibility’ (Robinson, 2003:108). The rise of risk within the Probation context is largely associated with two developments, both of which assumed dominance in the 1990’s. These are the emergence of the public protection agenda in the criminal justice system and the emergence ‘of a body of knowledge about what works in reducing offending’ (Robinson, 2003:110). Within these two developments it is argued that if the risk factors for offending can be identified it is possible to ‘implement prevention methods to counteract them’ (Farrington, 2007:606). Thus it can be argued that the risk factors associated with Roy Whiting and Ian Huntley’s offending could have been controlled and managed if they had been identified correctly. This subsequently would have protected Sarah Payne, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman from their fates at the hands of these men.

### **Risk Assessments**

‘Risk and dangerousness assessments refer to a variety of methods developed to limit the levels of risk to the public while at the same time providing less restrictive arrangements for offenders’ (Howitt, 2009:445). Traditionally risk assessments have focused upon recidivism. This refers to the likelihood of an offender reoffending after release or at some other point in the future. However there is a key difference ‘between the statistical risk of the occurrence of an event in the future and the dangerousness of that event’ (Howitt, 2009:449). The danger aspect is ‘defined as the degree of damage or harm that may follow an event happening’ (Crighton, 2005:53).

Therefore it is important for risk assessments used within the criminal justice system to take into account both the risk of reoffending and the risk of harm an offender might cause. The OASys assessment takes into account both the risk of reoffending and the dangerousness of that offending. There are two types of risk and dangerousness assessment; the first is based on clinical judgement and the second type is an actuarial assessment (Howitt, 2002:359).

Clinical approaches to risk and dangerousness assessments are based on the tradition of ‘one to one case work in medical, social work and probation contexts’ (Robinson, 2003:113). Practitioners use their experience, interviewing skills, observation and professional judgement to arrive at a ‘judgement regarding the offenders risk to the community and his or her treatment needs’ (Andrews and Bonta, 2006:286). This approach is known as the first generation of assessment practice. However the mid 1990’s saw a growing critique of the clinical approach, which was characterised by ‘low interrater reliability, low validity and a failure to specify the decision-making process’ (Dolan and Doyle, 2000:304). In addition to this clinical approaches to risk assessment were considered to have ‘inferior predictive validity compared to actuarial predictions’ (Dolan and Doyle, 2000:304).

Actuarial risk assessments are based upon statistical calculations of probability and are referred to as the second generation of assessment practice. The essential feature of this method is the ‘availability of a database which highlights the relationship between predictor variables and reoffending variables in a large group of offenders’ (OASys uses the OGRS 3) (Howitt, 2009:455). The predictor characteristics include demographic variables such as age, criminal history and similar factors. ‘Reoffending involves appropriate measures of recidivism such as reconviction for a similar offence in a five year period on release’ (Howitt, 2002:364). Therefore statistical prediction is founded on the idea ‘that a particular offender can be considered in the light of how other, similar offenders behaved’ (Howitt, 2002:364). The main strength of using this method is that it relies on empirical data which means that it can offer ‘high levels of predictive validity or accuracy’ (Robinson, 2003: 115). However there are some problems associated with using actuarial methods. While they are useful in terms of predicting the likelihood of reconviction, they generally tell the assessor ‘nothing about the type or seriousness of any further offence’ (Robinson, 2003:115). Additionally these types of assessments rely on static factors which cannot be altered or modified and ‘offenders can and do change, which limits the predictive value of such data in predicting outcomes’ (Crighton, 2005:56)

More recently a third generation method of risk prediction has emerged which is known as the Risk/needs assessment (Home Office, 2000). These instruments combine actuarial and clinical techniques. It also incorporates dynamic risk factors which are aspects of an individual’s current functioning that relate to the occurrence of the risk (Hollin, 2003:312). This combination of static and dynamic predictors gives the strongest basis by which to predict risk. Furthermore dynamic factors such as psychological functioning and social situational conditions are open to change and this ‘opportunity for change presents possibilities for risk management’ (Hollin, 2002:312). The Offender Assessment System falls within this type of risk assessment.

### The origins of OASys

The use of risk assessments within the Probation service is not new. It was believed that ‘predictor scales would ensure better targeting, improve service delivery, and make area-wide standards consistent, thereby resulting in more effective use of scarce resources’ (Mair *et al*, 2006:9). Thus the 1990’s what works movement saw a number of risk assessments emerge within the Probation Service. The offender group reconviction scale (OGRS) is a reconviction predictor which uses demographic data from a large sample of offenders (Mair *et al*, 2006:9). In addition to this other tools were developed which had a more specific focus. For example the Level of Service Inventory Revised (LSI-R) was originally developed due to ‘discussions about how to select offenders who required more intensive supervision at a time when caseloads were increasing and decisions about priorities had to be made’ (Raynor *et al* 2000 cited in Burnett *et al*, 2007:216). It was adopted by roughly twenty probation areas in the UK (Burnett *et al*, 2007:216). However such assessments were found not to be consistent. Thus in 1998 Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation emphasised the need for a national framework for structured assessment to counter these problems (Mair *et al*, 2006:10). Therefore the development of OASys began in 1999. Its development was informed by the findings of numerous research studies so ‘that OASys would combine the best aspects of existing instruments, in terms of both predictive accuracy and user-friendliness’ (Robinson, 2003:118).

### What is OASys?

The Offender Assessment System (OASys) was designed jointly by the Prison and Probation Services as a ‘standard assessment tool that could be used across both community and custodial settings’ (Burnett *et al*, 2007:221). Offenders are assessed at the pre-sentence stage, at the start of most community and custodial sentences and at regular intervals during the sentences (Home Office, 2006). ‘OASys was rolled out nationally in 2001 as a paper-based system, but it was always intended that an electronic version would be developed that would enable the assessments to be exchanged between both services (eOASys)’ (Holden, 2007:184). The Prison Service and the Probation Service developed their own IT systems separately due to differences in IT infrastructures and the two systems were rolled out in 2003 and were connected to one another in stages between 2004 and 2006 (Holden, 2007:184).

OASys was intended to:

- assess how likely an offender is to be reconvicted
- identify and classify offending related needs, including basic personality characteristics, cognitive behavioural variables and social variables
- assess risk of harm (to self, general public, known adults, children, staff and other prisoners)
- assist with management of risk of harm
- link assessments and sentence plans
- Indicate any need for further specialist assessments
- Measure how an offender changes during the period of a sentence

(Tancred, 2005:110))

OASys consists of five main components which are as follows:

1. **Risk of reconviction and offending related factors.** This section includes offending information both past and current, social and economic factors and personal factors. All these sections are scored from zero to two. The higher the score the, the more likely the factor is related to the offending. There is also a section on health but this is not scored.
2. **Risk of serious harm to others, risks to the individual and other risks.** There are four levels of risk of serious harm within OASys these are; low, medium, high and very high.
3. **The OASys Summary sheet.** This component identifies the risks and needs relating to the offender. It also shows the main areas of work that need to be included in the sentence plan and risk management plan.
4. **The Sentence Plan.** This component draws all the elements of OASys together and looks ahead to the management of the offender throughout their sentence and leads to the preparation of a sentence plan. This plan is reviewed at regular intervals.
5. **Self-assessment.** The self assessment questionnaire gives the offender an opportunity to record their views. It gives the offender manager a clear insight into how offenders see their lives and their offending behaviour. The self assessment questionnaire also contributes to the sentence plan.

(Holden, 2007:185-186)

### **Issues associated with using OASys as a risk assessment tool**

OASys is considered to be efficient as a risk assessment tool as it combines the best aspects of previously existing assessment tools, which in theory should mean that it is accurate in its predictions and should be user friendly (Robinson, 2003:118). However research suggests that OASys is not always user friendly. Mair *et al* 2006 found that there was a lot of repetition/ duplication involved in completing it, it was complicated to use, and the coding/scoring system was confusing (Mair *et al*, 2006:14). This could be problematic in terms of the accuracy of the assessment. If the assessor finds the system confusing the data may not be input correctly into OASys. This may explain why Williams (2010) saw a number of OASys reports where the assessor had identified a factor as being a significant influence in the offending history of an individual (for example substance misuse), but in another section of the report where it asks if substance misuse is a concern, they replied with either a no or zero scoring (Williams, 2010:150). In addition to this it can be argued that OASys has led to the de-skilling of the probation officer role as time is spent inputting data rather than ‘allowing the necessary time to build people skills which should enable understanding’ (Whitehead, 2007:33). A study conducted by Fitzgibbon and green (2006) supports this concept, as they found that the majority of their sample had little supplementary information to expand on tick boxes. This may indicate that when ‘tick boxes are presented the assessors question their ability to clinically expand on the assessment and they resort to just getting the job done’ (Fitzgibbon and Green, 2006:38).

### **Conclusion**

The above discussion draws upon literature that explores the background in which OASys was developed. It also brings to the fore front issues regarding the use of risk assessments in general and those issues specific to the use of OASys. This chapter has highlighted that OASys is not free human error. It is also evident that OASys can be

problematic for those who use it. However on the other hand OASys combines clinical and actuarial approaches to risk assessment which gives it the strongest basis by which to predict risk. In addition to this it enables the assessment to be shared between the National Probation Service and the Prison System.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

For the purpose of this dissertation both primary and secondary research methods were used. This was based on the notion that a balanced approach could be used in regard to evaluating the Offender Assessment System (OASys).

### **Primary Research**

The primary research for this study (see chapter 4) was carried out with seven employees of the National Probation Service. The individuals, which consisted of one offender manager, four probation officers and two probation service officers, all used OASys and were able to give a clear insight into the benefits and limitations of using OASys. The primary research carried out for this project was in the form of a semi-structured interview. This method was chosen due to the fact that it accommodates flexibility which allows specific issues to be addressed in more detail but the research still has a clear focus, rather than a general notion of wanting to do research on a subject (Bryman, 2004:323). The interviewees were part of a snowball sample; this means that the participants were recruited through the first point of access (an employee at the National Probation Service). The reason this form of sample was used is that it eliminated the possibility of selecting those who would not have been suitable for the research. For example those who are employed within the Probation Service but do not use OASys.

The advantages of using the semi-structured interview were that it allowed the participants to ‘answer more on their own terms than the standardized interview would permit, but it still provided a greater structure for comparability over that of the focused interview’ (May, 2001:123). Additionally the question design meant that there were no set questions during the interview, there was only an outline of areas of interest that needed to be touched upon (see Appendix A). This allowed the interviewer to alter their sequence and probe for more information. Thus the interviewer ‘could adapt the research method to the respondent’s level of comprehension and articulacy, and handle the fact that in responding to a question, people often provide the answers to questions we were going to ask later’ (Fielding and Thomas, 2008:247). Furthermore the semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to ‘obtain desired information more quickly than other data-gathering methods such as mailed-questionnaires’ (Champion, 2006:289).

However there were some limitations in using this type of research method. It is important to note that the semi-structured interviews were conducted face to face. Therefore Interviewer bias could not fully be accounted for. This refers to the whole character of the interviewer and the impact this may have on the responses of the interviewee (David and Sutton, 2004:89). Another limitation is linked to the size of the sample. It is highly unlikely that the sample will be representative of the population (Bryman, 2004:102). For the sample to be representative it must ‘reflect the population accurately, so that it is a microcosm of the population’ (Bryman, 2004:543). The sample size in this piece of research is small due to issues relating to time and cost. The researcher was a student and had limited funds to complete the research and there was also a strict time limit in which the research needed to be completed. This means that the sample is unlikely to reflect the whole population’s views on OASys. Thus there are concerns about external validity and the ability to

generalise within this study. External validity refers to whether or not ‘the results of the study can be generalised beyond the specific research context in which it was conducted’ (Bryman, 2004:539). This particular study is unable to generalise the findings due to the small sample size.

### **Gaining Access**

The preferred deadline for the analysis of the data was put behind due to the problems surrounding access. In an attempt to gain access the researcher sent an email which outlined ‘the purposes of the interview and the research objectives’ (Champion, 2006:284). However a telephone call two weeks later established that this email had not been received. This meant that another email had to be sent and the researcher had to further await a reply. Therefore there were communication issues when attempting to gain access. However in the end sheer persistence paid off and the researcher was able to gain access.

### **Ethics**

During the collection of primary data it was crucial for the guidelines set out by the Sciences Research Ethics Committee (SREC) to be followed. These guidelines were followed in a variety of different ways. The interviewees received a participant information sheet to read through before the interviews commenced (see Appendix B). The participant information sheet informed the interviewees that their anonymity would be kept throughout the process which highlights the importance of the confidentiality of the respondents. Furthermore the participants were given the details of the research area and the specific areas of interest to be studied. The interviewees were also made aware of their right to withdraw any information prior to a date set down by the researcher and were briefed on the fact that the audio tapes used for the interview would be destroyed within six months of the project end date. Once the participant had been fully informed of all the details of the research consent was sought via a consent form (see Appendix C). This made sure that the interviewee understood the purpose of the research and their part in it.

### **Recording and Transcription**

The interviews were audio recorded and a few notes were jotted down. The reason for this is that the interviewer is supposed to be alert to what is being said and follow up any interesting points. The recording allows for this to be done as the researcher is not distracted from having to concentrate on getting down notes on what is said (Bryman, 2004:329). However one of the problems found with the tape recording was that a number of the respondents became self-conscious or alarmed at the prospect of their words being preserved (Bryman, 2004:330). Another problem came from the fact that a cassette tape recorder was used to record the interviews. Due to the nature of this type of recorder there were difficulties when transcribing in relation to the background noise and parts of the interview were particularly quite.

The interviews were then transcribed which is an extremely lengthy process, it can take between three to six hours (David and Sutton, 2004:91). However the hours of listening required to transcribe a tape are often the best way of ‘gaining a fine-grained knowledge of your own data’ (David and Sutton, 2004:91). The software which can now assist the researcher in qualitative data analysis was considered but discarded due to the fact that it requires some level of training, which there was no time for. For the purpose of this dissertation research selective transcription was used. This means that

only those portions of the interview that were considered useful and relevant were transcribed rather than going through everything the respondents said (Bryman, 2004:332). An obvious benefit of doing this is that it cut down on the amount of time needed. However a key problem in doing this is that some of the information deemed irrelevant may become significant later on and the researcher will need to go back through the tapes to make sure that nothing was missed (Fielding and Thomas, 2008, 257).

### **Secondary Research**

Secondary analysis was also used to complete this dissertation research. This refers to the reanalysis of data which was originally compiled for other purposes (Hagan, 2006:251). Examples of secondary data used include journal articles and criminological literature. The Majority of the sources were available in the library but certain journals or articles were accessed via e-search (Belcher, 2008:6). It is important to note that while a substantial amount of the data was collected through the internet the data gathered was collected from reputable sources such as the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice in an attempt to account for inaccuracies (Belcher, 2008:6). Articles and studies providing information on what the Offender Assessment System is and its known benefits and limitations were particularly useful in completing the research. The advantages of using secondary analysis are that it is cost effective (Berg, 2007:328) and it is a good use of the extensive amount of already existing data which allows the primary research used in this dissertation to be compared with the findings of other peoples research (Hagan, 2006:251). This comparison was particularly useful in highlighting whether or not previously existing problems still existed despite the improvements made to OASys.

### **Alternative Research Methods**

The research methods used during this dissertation were deemed to be realistic options. Primary and Secondary Research were relatively easy to get access to within the time limits set. However the use of non-participant observation may have enhanced the findings of the research. The observation would have taken on an overt role. This means that those being studied would be aware of the ethnographer's status as a researcher (Bryman, 2004:294). It would have been particularly useful for the researcher to observe first hand the completion of OASys. A benefit of doing this would be that the researcher would become familiar with the exact layout of the assessment and could time exactly how long it takes to complete on average. However the researcher was an undergraduate with strict time limits and it has already been highlighted in the previous chapter that the completion of an OASys assessment is a time consuming process. This means that it would not have been possible for the researcher to observe the completion of a number of OASys assessments as it would have impinged too much on the researcher's time limits. Therefore the chosen methods gave balance to the study without infringing too much on time limits.

### **Conclusion**

The research methods that were chosen for this project were considered appropriate as it gave a clear insight into the successes and limitations of the Offender Assessment System. It did this by exploring the views and attitudes of those who use the assessment tool on a regular basis and are familiar with its outcomes. The collection of secondary data allowed the researcher to compare and contrast the findings with

other studies and articles. Overall the methods chosen were a realistic and feasible way to gain an insight into the topic area.

## **Chapter 4: Research Findings**

### **Introduction**

The following discussion is of the findings of seven interviews carried out with employees of the National Probation Service. Their positions within the Probation service varied; one of the participants was an offender manager, four of the participants were probation officers and two were Probation Service officers. Any names and locations mentioned during the interview process are not disclosed within this chapter.

The purpose of the interviews was to evaluate the use of OASys within the Probation Service. The interviews were used in order to explore the views held by the Probation Services employees on OASys. Within the interview process the respondents were asked to comment on the following areas; the length of time it takes to complete an OASys assessment, technical problems, gender specific questions, the usefulness of OASys, the results of OASys and the relevancy of information required during the assessment.

### **The length of time it takes to complete the OASys assessment**

The respondents were asked to comment on whether or not they found the OASys assessment to be time consuming.

Participants A, B, C and E said that it depends on a number of factors as to whether or not the assessment can be considered time consuming. The type of report done on the offender at the sentencing stage was found to influence the length of time an OASys assessment took to complete. If the offender had ‘been sentenced with a pre-sentence report’ (respondent A, 2011), it was considered to be a less time consuming process as ‘the bulk of the information is already present’ (respondent E, 2011). However if the court had requested a fast track report the OASys assessment would be a lengthier process as ‘you’ve got less information’ (respondent A, 2011) and ‘bits can be missing’ (respondent A, 2011). This means that there is ‘a lot of referring back to previous records and CPS booking processes which can be quite time consuming’ (respondent E, 2011). Another factor which influences the amount of time it takes to complete an OASys is ‘how much you get interrupted within it’ (respondent C, 2011). If you’re able just to do the assessment it can be alright but if you have to deal with something and go back to it you ‘sort of have to familiarise, get back in that zone’ (respondent A, 2011). Furthermore the complexity of the case and the situation of the offender need to be taken into account. If the offender has quite a few issues the OASys will take longer as more information is required. However participant B said that they didn’t think that OASys is more or less time consuming than any other assessment tool as there is a standard amount of information you need to get’ (respondent B, 2011).

Participants D, F and G did find OASys to be time consuming ‘yes I do think it is quite a lengthy process’ (respondent F, 2011). One of the participants found the OASys assessment to be particularly time consuming as they weren’t as competent on the computer. Participant G who has worked within the Probation Service for twenty three years said ‘I’m not as computer literate as some of my colleagues so it takes me a little bit longer.’

When the participants were asked roughly how long it would take them to complete an OASys assessment the majority of the participants said that an initial assessment would take about an hour to two hours. If the assessor was just reviewing and updating information it would probably take between 45 minutes to an hour. However Participants F and G said that it would take them between three to five hours to do an in-depth OASys assessment.

### **Technical Problems**

The participants were asked to comment on any technical difficulties that occur whilst using OASys.

One of the main technological problems associated with using OASys was that the computers sometimes crash ‘not that that happens very often’ (respondent C, 2011). However even though it doesn’t happen very often it does have a significant impact when completing an OASys assessment. Work can be lost if it hasn’t been auto saved, which means that you loose time re-doing the work. Additionally you cannot do the assessment until the computers are back up and running ‘you couldn’t do anything, you’d just have to wait, could be an hour, could be a day, your buggered really’ (respondent G, 2011). If an employee at the Probation Service has got a review due in that day it can cause huge problems as they have targets to meet and as a result they may be under more pressure when the computers are back up and running. Therefore they are more likely to do a ‘last minute question as quick as possible just so they are not missing any deadlines’ (respondent A, 2011). Other problems with the computer software include that it can go very slow. This means that it doesn’t always respond quickly ‘particularly at times when it is being used a lot’ (respondent E, 2011).

The next most commonly mentioned problem is that ‘each risk assessment can only hold up to 4,000 words per section’ (respondent E, 2011). If you go over the 4,000 words a red cross comes up and you have to ‘amend it because they want it to be just in 4,000 words maximum’ (respondent A, 2011). The reason for this word limit is that if the Prison Service received an OASys assessment over the 4,000 word limit they wouldn’t get all the information. 4,000 words per section sounds like a lot but if ‘you’ve got someone who is a long term offender and there is a lot of relevant information or someone who is on more than one order or their offending was committed whilst other orders are current’ (respondent E, 2011) then it is more than likely that you will need more than 4,000 words so that all the relevant information can be input.

### **Gender specific questions**

The researcher asked the respondents to comment on whether or not they had come across any questions which could be considered gender biased.

The majority of the participants did not feel that any of the questions within OASys were directed more towards a certain gender. The respondents thought that the questions within OASys were relevant to both females and males. This is mainly down to the fact that ‘Probation has such a big thing about diversity’ (respondent A, 2011).

However there were two exceptions to what the majority thought. Participant B couldn’t think of any specific questions that leaned towards a certain gender but did say ‘I would imagine that there’s probably some that are more male focused than

female focused, and quite often that's the case, but probably as a male I don't notice' (respondent B, 2011). Furthermore participant C did feel that it was slightly more male biased. The reason they felt this to be the case is due to the fact that the majority of the population probation work with are often male. The participant did go on to say that even though some of the questions are slightly biased you can work with them as they aren't completely irrelevant.

### **The usefulness of OASys**

The participants were asked to comment on how useful they personally found the OASys assessment tool to be.

All seven of the participants found the assessment tool to be useful. When participant E was asked whether they found it useful they responded by saying 'yes definitely, and the longer I've used it the more they've improved it, which makes it better as a risk assessment tool' (respondent E, 2011). Some of the reasons as to why the participants found it useful include that it covers all aspects; it is a faster process for court reports, it is a good way of gathering information on previous behaviour, it calculates the statistical chance of the offender reoffending, and it is a good way of organising all the information. Participants E and C also argue that OASys is useful in terms of highlighting other issues that may not be displayed as linked to the offending. For example, if 'on the surface of it someone looks like they are a low risk offender, it could just be a straightforward shop theft, but if you go through all the layers of the OASys and you input all that official information background your risk predictor may come up with something contrary to that because of all the bits you use in the mental health, substance misuse, financial issues sections' (respondent E, 2011). However some of the questions 'can be a bit repetitive' (respondent F, 2011), which isn't useful as it doesn't add anything new and increases the length of time it takes to complete unnecessarily.

### **Results**

The respondents were asked to comment on whether or not they found the OASys results to reflect reality.

The majority of the respondents felt that that the results did reflect reality most of the time. Participant E argues that one of the reasons as to why the OASys assessment does usually reflect reality is that the assessor has the facility to down risk an offender if risk factors are removed or have been addressed. The assessor can also up tier offenders if the police are giving Intel that is a cause for concern. This means that the assessment does reflect the changes in the offender's circumstances. However there are some instances where the assessment doesn't reflect reality. This can be down to the quality of the information you have to work with. For example, if the offender hasn't disclosed self harm or suicidal thoughts then you're not aware of that information and the results of the risk of harm section would be impaired (respondent A, 2011). The statistical calculation of the risk of reoffending can also be a bit skewed sometimes due to the fact that some people have a conviction at an early age and this carries through the rest of their time of life even though there maybe not as active now. 'There have been times in assessments where statistically they are assessed as high risk offenders but then in the report I've put although statistically they're a higher risk they're lifestyle isn't there' (respondent F, 2011).

Participant B felt that the risk of serious harm does reflect the level of risk the offender poses. However when it came to number crunching this particular participant found that some of the results could be misleading. For example, you could have an offender with a stable background, stable social circumstances and a very non-existent record. All the number crunching scores would indicate that this person is low risk, but your professional judgement may be that this person is in actual fact a significant risk, more so than all the scores indicate (respondent B, 2011).

Participant G did not feel that the results of OASys reflected the level of risk of the offender. The participant thought that the bands (low, medium, high risk) were too narrow. Instead this particular respondent argues that 'you should have something like; low, very low, medium to high, high' (respondent G, 2011). The reason for this is because at the moment 'you tend to see people in the medium categories and some of them shouldn't be in the medium category they should be in low risk' (Participant G, 2011).

### **The relevancy of the information required on the OASys assessment**

The respondents were asked to comment on whether or not they found all of the information required in the OASys assessment to be relevant.

Nearly all of the participants said that they did find all the information required on the OASys assessment to be relevant. Three of the respondents said that all of the information required is relevant as 'you don't know what is needed until you've worked with the offender so as much information as possible is useful' (respondent D, 2011). In addition to this 'the assessment dictates that you find that information out in the first place so if you didn't find it out you wouldn't know whether it became irrelevant or not' (respondent B, 2011). Furthermore the information has 'got the potential to become relevant even if it's not at the present' (respondent B, 2011). For example, someone may live in a stable address and you may not give that section much attention but it could quite quickly become very relevant if that address got pulled away.

One of the participants when asked if they found all the information required relevant replied by saying 'yes but no really' (respondent G, 2011). 'Not always is the information relevant, a lot of it may be historic, but you feel as if you want to keep it in there just in case it comes back and bites you, so you've protected yourself, covered your back a little bit' (respondent G, 2011). The respondent then went on to say 'In the old days you just used to know these are the issues and deal with them, now its just ticking boxes for the sake of ticking boxes' (respondent G, 2011).

### **Potential improvements within OASys**

The participants were not directly asked if there was anything that they thought could be done to improve the OASys assessment but a few themes emerged during the research which will be bullet pointed below.

- Some of the information that is repetitive could be cut down on.
- Having one tick box saying no change rather than going through the whole rigmarole of putting in all the sections no change, no change, no change when you have to do an OASys transfer from one area to another as it would save time.

- You should be able to load all of the information from CRAMS onto OASys without having to input the information into both systems separately.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter is to give the reader an insight into how OASys is viewed from the perspective of seven Probation employees who use the assessment tool. The next chapter will bring together certain aspects of the primary and secondary research with an aim to summarise the benefits and limitations of having OASys as a standard risk assessment tool within the Probation Service.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings**

### **Introduction**

The aim of this study was to evaluate OASys as an assessment tool for the National Probation Service. It was also the intention of the researcher to identify the aspects of OASys which the Probation service employees found to be most beneficial and those aspects which were not considered to be beneficial. This included exploring a number of issues; such as the length of time OASys takes to complete, the technical problems that occur when using OASys, the relevancy of the information required, the accuracy of the results, the usefulness of OASys and whether or not OASys contains any gender specific questions.

This chapter focuses on the qualitative research put forward on the above subject areas. The primary findings mentioned in the previous chapter will be analysed alongside previously existing research literature concerning the benefits and limitations of having OASys as a standardised risk assessment tool for the Probation Service.

### **Implications of findings**

In 2009 Tim Wilson the National chair of Napo criticised OASys in a letter addressed to Michael Spurr the chief of operations of NOMS. He said that ‘there are fewer individual items which have generated more complaints from our members than OASys, and while many staff find it useful in many respects, there remains a great deal of criticism of its short comings’ (Napo, 2009). Furthermore Maria Eagle, a minister at the ministry of justice, said that OASys is frustrating to fill in and is far to slow. John Cummings a former labour MP responded to Maria Eagles comments on OASys by saying that ‘we are looking with our staff at ways of improving and streamlining the process, and we hope to be able to make progress on that’(Parliament, 2009). There have recently been some attempts to address the shortcomings of OASys, for example assessments are now tiered. This means that you can either do a complete OASys assessment or an OASys assessment with some of the sections taken out. However the implications of the findings of the primary research suggest that the improvements made to OASys aren’t as far forward as they should be.

### **The length of time it takes to complete an OASys assessment**

The offender assessment system is often viewed as a rather time consuming process. Research clarifies this point. Mair *et al* (2006) conducted a study into Probation Officers views about OASys. The study found that one of the most commonly mentioned problem that respondents had with OASys was that it was time consuming to complete (Mair *et al*, 2006:13). The primary research conducted during this study (see previous chapter) also confirms this point. Three of the participants said that they did find OASys to be time consuming ‘It is quite a lengthy process’ (respondent F, 2011). Three other participants said that there were a number of influential factors which further increase the amount of time it takes to complete an OASys assessment. One key factor relates to the technical problems that occur when completing an OASys. If the computer crashes and work has been lost the assessor has to spend time re-doing it which increases the overall time the assessment takes to complete. The length of time it takes to complete the OASys assessment has implications in relation to meeting deadlines and hitting targets.

At the minute there are roughly thirteen high priority targets within probation. Examples of these ‘are victim contacts; offending behaviour programme completions, breach action, and the completion of computerised OASys risk management plans within tight timescales’ (Whitehead, 2007:88). If a number of high priority targets are not met by individual members of staff, and in turn the organisation as a whole, a range of sanctions are activated (Whitehead, 2007:44). Those services which fall short of their targets do not receive their performance bonus. This regime of cash linked targets coupled with a lack of time due to deadlines and high caseloads may result in unintended consequences (Whitehead, 2007:44). One of the participants during the study said that because OASys is so time consuming ‘you don’t always give the amount of time that should complete OASys, sometimes you just rush through things and your not as detailed as you should be’ (respondent G, 2011). This may mean that a number of caseloads aren’t supervised properly, as the assessment is not as accurate as it could be due to rushing in order to meet targets and deadlines.

### **Gender specific questions**

‘Women account for a very small proportion of all known offenders and as a consequence of this very little attention has been given to women’ (Heidensohn and Gelsthorpe, 2007:383). Feminists challenge the male centredness of criminology as it ‘fails to understand the importance of gender and sex roles’ (Gelsthorpe and Morris 1988 cited in Hopkins Burke, 2005:162). It is argued that malestream criminology attempts to equally apply theories that are based on men to women (Gelsthorpe, 2003:30). Therefore women are receiving treatment in a system designed for men. The findings from the primary research (see chapter 4) show that the majority of the participants did not consider the questions within OASys to be directed more towards a certain gender; they thought that the questions were relevant to both males and females. However two of the participants did think that the questions were slightly more male orientated. Participant C said that the reason for this is because the majority of the population that is dealt with in probation is male. The implications of this are that it may support the argument that female offenders should have a separate risk assessment tool which is designed specifically for women.

The majority of risk assessment tools have been ‘derived from research with male offenders and transference to use with women’ proves problematic (Kemshall, 2004:215). Rumgay 1996 identifies a number of key reasons for rejecting the male orientated approach to risk and criminogenic needs in favour of a needs led approach to women offenders (cited in Kemshall, 2004: 212). Firstly women have less involvement in the criminal justice system, which may mean that the use of previous convictions as a key predictor of recidivism is partially hindered. Secondly risk prediction tools which are male orientated and have been adapted to apply to women have not been successful in terms of predictive accuracy (Rumgay 1996 cited in Kemshall, 2004: 213). Thirdly female offender’s risk factors differ to those that relate to male offending. For example factors such as criminal associates and educational levels have been found to be less important in explaining female criminality (Caulfield, 210:316). The factors which are found to be associated with reconviction amongst female offenders are physical and sexual abuse (Van Wormer, 2010:66). OASys as with other assessments uses the same version of measures with both male and female offenders, despite being based on criminogenic needs identified solely for males (Caulfield, 2010:320). Therefore OASys may not provide a consistent and in-

depth assessment of female offenders risk and needs as female criminogenic needs are not the same as male criminogenic needs. Nevertheless there is some overlap between the needs of female and male offenders but the ‘presence of similar needs does not mean that the needs are of equal magnitude’ (Hollin and Palmer, 2006:187). Therefore OASys has the potential for inaccurate assessments of female offenders (Caulfield, 2010:323).

### **The usefulness of OASys**

Feeley and Simon (1994) argue that there is an existence of a new penology which emerged in the early 1990s (cited in Whitehead, 2007:46). This new penology can be characterized by a move away from rehabilitation and treatment towards the concept of probability and risk. Furthermore there is a transition from ‘ideals and values associated with people, to managerial, technocratic and bureaucratic procedures’ (Whitehead, 2007:46). Probation policy and practice has taken on board this new penology which has led to ‘ever increasing control from central government over all aspects of work with offenders’ (Annison *et al*, 2008:259). Therefore the Probation Service became concerned with ‘performance targets, measures of efficiency and effectiveness and an overriding concern with’ best value for money (Fitzgibbon, 2008:86). The probation service is no longer ‘a people orientated enterprise’ (Whitehead, 2007:13), rather it has been transformed into a ‘politically dominated, centrally controlled, machine driven system for bureaucratically managing, containing and controlling offenders’ (insidetime, 2009). Within this framework one of the first tasks of the day is to switch on the computer, which suggests that probation officers have merely become data entry operators (Whitehead, 2007:28). The completion of OASys falls within the many computer-controlled tasks that staff must perform.

The findings from the primary research suggest that the use of OASys is very much part of this bureaucratic process. When the participants were asked whether or not they found OASys to be useful they responded by saying yes. The participants felt that OASys was useful in terms of efficiency as it is ‘a faster process for court reports’ (respondent D, 2011) and it is ‘a good way to organise the information’ (respondent B, 2011). This computer culture has profound implications. Firstly the generation of data does not necessarily give a deeper understanding of the offender and their criminogenic needs (Whitehead, 2007:33). Secondly it is argued that this bureaucratic process has led to the ‘erosion of the skills, experience, knowledge, understanding and professionalism’ (insidetime, 2009) required within the probation officer role. Oldfield (1994) refers to this as McDonaldisation. This means that tasks within the probation service have been ‘broken down into a series of simple but fragmented operations that can be performed by almost anyone with minimal training’ (Oldfield, 1984:187). The primary research supports this as it suggests that this bureaucratic process can lead to a de-skilling of the probation officer role. Participant G said that ‘in the old days you just used to know these are the issues and deal with them, now it’s just ticking boxes for the sake of ticking boxes’ (respondent G, 2011). Thirdly this bureaucratic process does not make the job any easier or faster as data entry demands a large amount of time (Whitehead, 2007:33).

### **The results of OASys**

A key debate within probation practice concerns the relative merits of clinical and actuarial approaches to risk assessment (Litwack, 2001:409). Clinical assessments are based upon professional judgement. The professional gathers information on the

offender via a number of interviews and then uses this information to ‘arrive at a judgement regarding the offenders risk to the community and his/her treatment needs’ (Andrews and Bonta, 2006:286). Clinical assessments tend to use dynamic risk factors relating to psychological functioning and social situation conditions (Hollin, 2002:312). Actuarial assessments on the other hand are based upon statistical calculations of probability and are commonly associated with static risk factors, which include things such as criminal history and age of first offence (Howitt, 2009:455). Within the probation context it is important for risk assessments to be as accurate as possible otherwise there would be a common occurrence of either false positives or false negatives. ‘False positive predictions refer to the erroneous identification of low-risk offenders as high risk’ (Robinson, 2003:122), which can result in the offender’s loss of liberty. On the other hand ‘false negative predictions refer to the erroneous identification of high-risk offenders as low risk’ (Robinson, 2003:122), which may compromise the public’s safety. Traditionally actuarial assessments have been favoured over clinical assessments. Clinical assessments have been considered as ‘a rush to negative judgement, without sufficient efforts to make a fair review of the clinical enterprise’ (Litwack, 2001:410). Actuarial assessments in contrast are believed to offer high levels of predictive validity or accuracy due to the fact that they are grounded in empirical data (Robinson, 2003:115).

OASys uses both static and dynamic risk variables in its prediction algorithm (Williams, 2010:156). This in theory should mean that OASys gives the strongest basis by which to predict risk. However the findings from the primary research indicate that the results of OASys can sometimes be a bit skewed due to the OGRS results, which refers to the actuarial part of the assessment. This finding contradicts the findings from the existing literature as it suggests that actuarial assessments should not be favoured over clinical assessments as they do not offer higher levels of predictive accuracy. For example Respondent B (2011) argues that the number crunching scores can sometimes be a bit misleading. This is because the scores may indicate that an offender is low risk but the professional judgement in that situation may be that this person is in actual fact a significant risk. Likewise respondent F (2011) said that the statistical calculation of the risk of reoffending can sometimes be inaccurate due to the fact that those who have a conviction at an early age are still assessed as high regardless of whether or not they are currently criminally active. Nevertheless it could be argued here that if an offender is brought before the probation service and an OASys assessment is required it is reasonable to assume that the offender must still be criminally active as they would not need to be supervised if they hadn’t committed a further offence.

### **The relevancy of the information required for the OASys assessment**

OASys uses past and current risk factors in order to measure the likelihood of an individual re-offending (Webster *et al*, 2006:8). Risk factors are also used to predict the seriousness of harm when that re-offending takes place. ‘Risk factors are prior factors that increase the risk of occurrence of the onset, frequency, persistence, or duration of offending’ (Kazdin *et al* 1997 cited in Farrington, 2007:605). There are two categories of risk factor static and dynamic. ‘Static factors (i.e. age, previous convictions) are aspects of the offenders past that are predictive of recidivism but cannot be changed’ (Gendreau *et al*, 1996:575). Dynamic risk factors, often referred to as criminogenic needs (e.g. antisocial cognitions, values and behaviours), are susceptible to change. There is little ‘disagreement in criminological literature about

some of the predictors of adult offender recidivism, such as age, gender, criminal history, early family factors, and criminal associates' (Gandreau *et al*, 1996:576). However there has been 'considerable controversy and/or a lack of interest in dynamic variables' (Gandreau *et al*, 1996:576). Individual variables such as offender needs, abilities, attitudes, and personality styles are subject to change and their measurement involves some degree of subjectivity and 'Elementary psychometric theory reminds us that unreliability in measurement leads to an underestimation of validity' (Gandreau *et al*, 1996:576). Therefore this line of reasoning would suggest that dynamic variables are relatively weak predictors of criminal behaviour. Therefore dynamic variables should not be used to predict risk within criminological risk assessments as the outcome would be inaccurate.

OASys uses both static and dynamic risk variables in order to predict risk and requires information on; offending, accommodation, education, training, employability, financial management, income, relationships, lifestyle, associates, drug misuse, alcohol misuse, thinking, behaviour and attitudes (respondent E, 2011). These areas are the relevant risk factors within OASys. The findings from the primary research contradict the published literature as the majority of the participants felt that all of the information that is required to complete the OASys assessment is relevant. The participants did not say that they felt that the information that was needed in order to complete the static risk factors were more or less relevant than the information needed to complete the dynamic risk factors. However one of the participants did suggest that dynamic variables, those that change, are important. 'Some of the information has got the potential to become relevant even if it's not at the present, (respondent B, 2011). Another of the participants said that some of the factors can be considered as historical, meaning that they are not as relevant in today's society. An example of this relates to early family factors. Traditionally coming from a broken home has been regarded as an offending risk factor. Divorce rates in the past were much lower and there was more stigma attached to divorce than there is today. Therefore children from divorced families probably would have suffered more negative effects in their social environment than they would today (Pakes and Winstone, 2007:10). This may mean that parental divorce in childhood isn't such a significant risk factor today as it was in the past. This contradicts previously existing literature as it suggests that some risk factors relating to an offenders early family are not as significant as they once were.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has brought together the findings of the primary research and compared it with published data concerning the use of OASys within the National Probation Service. The final chapter will conclude this article and will put forward any recommendations.

## **Chapter 6: conclusion and recommendations**

### **Key findings**

The primary research showed that there are still a number of issues relating to the use of OASys within the Probation Service despite efforts to improve and streamline the process. The OASys assessment is still considered to be a lengthy process. In addition to this the technical problems that can occur whilst completing the OASys assessment increase the length of time that is required to complete OASys. The consequence of the time consuming nature of OASys is that it is sometimes difficult for probation employees to keep up with deadlines regarding the completion of OASys. Therefore some of the assessments may be rushed and may not be as detailed as they should be.

There are also issues in regard to the use of OASys for both male and female offenders. The primary research indicates that a few probation officers still feel that the OASys assessment is still more male-orientated. The secondary research used during this project suggests that women's risk factors are different to those factors that relate to male offending. Therefore it can be brought into question as to whether or not there should be a standardised assessment tool used for both men and women.

It is also apparent that there are still issues regarding the clinical versus actuarial assessment debate. Within this debate there are issues as to which type of risk factor is more accurate in predicting re-offending. The primary research suggests that the clinical assessment which uses dynamic variables is more effective within OASys as the actuarial part of the assessment can sometimes be a bit skewed which can lead to inaccurate results. Inaccurate results will mean that there are either false positives or false negatives. These false results will have negative implications for either the offender or the wider society. If a low risk offender is wrongly assessed as high risk it is likely that the offender will have an unnecessary loss of liberty. In contrast if a high risk offender is wrongly assessed as low risk members of the public may come to some harm.

The primary and secondary research used within this dissertation suggests that OASys is part of a bureaucratic process which can lead to the de-skilling of the probation officer role as more time is now spent ticking boxes just for the sake of ticking boxes rather than simply dealing with the relevant issues.

### **Research development**

With additional time and cooperation this research could have been expanded by including a larger number of probation employees and observations of the completion of the OASys assessment could have been included. The observations would have aided the research as the researcher could have noted first hand some of the issues that the employees had with OASys. Furthermore a larger sample may have offered other views in relation to the use of OASys within the probation context.

Areas that should be included within further research include whether or not employees at the probation service think that women should be assessed using a separate assessment system, which is specifically designed for women. Furthermore it would also be appropriate to see if probation employees believe that women have different risk factors to men. This could also include a possible evaluation of the current risk factors within OASys in relation to female offenders as this would give a

clearer insight into whether or not the risk factors did predict female criminality and risk of harm.

Further research should also be carried out into whether or not probation employees view OASys as part of a bureaucratic process. Additionally it would be enlightening to see if probation employees agree that OASys contributes to the de-skilling of the probation officer role.

### **Recommendations**

The findings from this research can be used to support the introduction of a number of changes within OASys which should create a more efficient and purposeful assessment. There are various ways in which the length of time it takes to complete the OASys assessment can be reduced. The areas of the assessment that are repetitive could be cut down upon. In addition to this when a transfer assessment is required and there has been no change in an offender's circumstances or risk factors those using the OASys assessment should be able to tick one box saying no change rather than going through the whole process of filling in no change, no change within all of the sections. Another way in which to reduce the length of time it takes to complete an OASys would be to develop new technologies in which the information from CRAMS can be updated onto OASys, as this would mean that the same information would not have to be filled out twice.

Another recommendation which is supported from the research findings is to increase both the probation services and prison services word limit per section as it would enable all of the relevant information on the offender to be included within the OASys assessment. Therefore this would allow for those circumstances in which the offender has a large quantity of complex issues.

### **Appendix A: Interview schedule used for primary research**

There will be no set questions as such during the interview; the reason for this is that it accommodates flexibility which allows specific details to be discussed in more detail. However the research does have a clear focus rather than just having a general notion of wanting to do research on a given topic, therefore there are a number of areas which will be open for discussion during the interview. These areas are:

- a) The time consuming nature of OASys.
- b) The ease of use.
- c) Technical problems associated with the equipment used.
- d) Gender specific questions.
- e) The usefulness of OASys.
- f) The results of OASys – Do you feel the results of OASys reflect the level of risk of offenders?
- g) The relevancy of information.

Introduce myself and thank the participant for taking part. Ensure of confidentiality and make it clear that the interview is voluntary.

State to the interviewee the purpose of the interview and explain why it is important. Indicate what the research is about and state that it is for dissertation purpose for an undergraduate degree in Criminology.

Other information required includes; how long the participant has worked in probation, their position, how long they have been using OASys and whether or not they have used another form of risk assessment tool. The reason for this is that it may affect the answers the participants give in response to the questions.

Would you like to ask any questions or add any information to what has already been discussed today?

Thank the participant for taking part

## **Appendix B: Participant information sheet in criminological research**

I am a third year Criminology student at Nottingham Trent University who is undertaking dissertation research on OASys. Please read through all the details on this form carefully as it will provide you with information about the research.

The purpose of this dissertation research is to assess the value of OASys as a risk assessment tool for the National Probation Service.

You are being asked to take part in an interview lasting approximately twenty minutes. The interviewer will ask a number of questions regarding OASys and you will be required to draw on your own experiences and opinions in answer to the questions. Your response will be tape recorded. During the tape recording you will be referred to as a letter e.g. participant A, to maximise anonymity. There are seven areas which will be discussed, these are;

- a) The time consuming nature of OASys
- b) The ease of use
- c) Technical problems associated with the equipment
- d) Gender specific questions
- e) The usefulness of OASys
- f) The results of OASys
- g) The relevancy of information

You have the right to withdraw without giving a reason to do so. If you wish to withdraw you should contact the researcher (or their supervisor) and ask for your data to be withdrawn from the study.

To protect your anonymity all names, places and organisations will be changed. Only the interviewer will have access to recordings. All recordings will be destroyed after completion of research. Data will be saved in a password project file and will be destroyed within six months of the project end date. Due to the nature of the research, extracts may be used in the final report.

Upon completion of the interview you are free to ask any questions you may have about the interview or research in general.

Participation is voluntary and greatly appreciated. If you are happy to take part in this research please sign and date the consent form. If you have any questions or concerns before, during or after your participation in this research my contact details are at the bottom of this form.

The deadline date for notice of withdrawal of any data is 11/03/2011

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**Appendix C: Consent Form to participate in criminological research**

*Agreement to consent*

I have read and understood the purpose of the research and my part in it.  
I have asked questions if needed and understand that I can contact the investigator at anytime with queries or concerns.  
I agree to have the interview recorded.  
I have the right to withdraw my data at any point during or after the interview and all materials will be destroyed.

I voluntarily agree to take part in this study

Signature of participant \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

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### Student's CERTIFICATE OF ETHICAL COMPLIANCE

Please tick all the relevant boxes and sign this Certificate and attach it your assignment or dissertation **when you submit it for assessment**. Please ask your supervisor to countersign this Certificate.

1. I confirm that the research for this assignment/dissertation was approved by the SREC before primary data collection began.	
2. I confirm that the research was conducted wholly in accordance to the information I gave the School Research Ethics Committee when I applied for ethical approval, and the project did not subsequently change in any way that affected this information.	
3. I confirm that the research was conducted wholly in accordance with one or more standard protocols which I also attach (where relevant).	
4. I confirm that the research was conducted wholly in accordance with the relevant guidance and guidelines as indicated in the application form for ethical approval.	

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ (Student)

Date \_\_\_\_\_

I confirm that, to the best of my knowledge, the research was conducted in line either with the specified guidance and protocol(s) or the information provided in the application for ethical approval.

Countersigned \_\_\_\_\_ (Supervisor)

Date \_\_\_\_\_