New hope for sex offender treatment

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In the last 10 years, psychologists have made substantial advances in clearly identifying factors that increase an offender's risk of committing an offense after release, Hanson says. These factors include the number of offenses, intimacy deficits, sexual preoccupations and age.

Actuarial scales for determining an offender's risk of committing more sex crimes after treatment are available, but not always trusted by judges and many clinicians, Prentky says. More often, courts base release decisions on progress reports from prison psychologists--relying heavily on their expertise.

"Psychologists are essentially being asked to determine what level of risk an individual poses to a community even though there is no definitive way to know for certain," LaFond says. "They're being asked to balance that risk with the individual liberty concerns of an offender. Science has come up with tools to help them, but it's still a huge responsibility and a terrible burden."