

Risk/Needs Assessment 101: Science Reveals New Tools to Manage Offenders

Every day, criminal justice officials make decisions that have enormous implications for public safety and spending: Should this offender be sentenced to prison or probation? What conditions of supervision are appropriate? Does this violation of supervision warrant a revocation to prison? Historically such critical decisions about offender punishment and treatment were guided by personal experience, professional judgment and a limited understanding about the most effective ways to deter offenders from committing future crimes.

Today our knowledge has vastly improved. After decades of experience managing offenders and analyzing data, practitioners

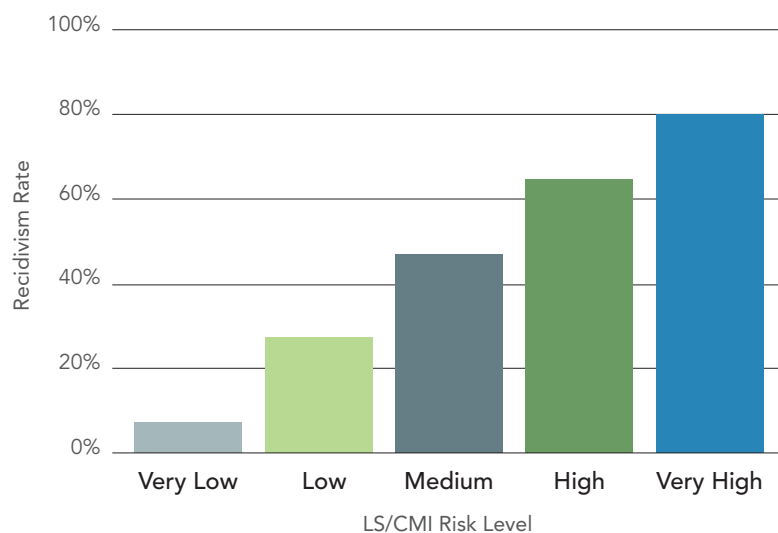
and researchers have identified key factors that can help predict the likelihood of an individual returning to crime, violence or drug use. The instruments that have been developed—and fine-tuned over time—to measure the likelihood of future criminal behavior can help officials to better identify individuals at a high risk of reoffending, while also identifying the types of supervision and services that are most likely to slow the revolving door of America's prisons (see Figure 1). When developed and used correctly, these risk/needs assessment tools can help criminal justice officials appropriately classify offenders and target interventions to reduce recidivism, improve public safety and cut costs.

Figure 1

Data Driven: Assessment Tools Can Accurately Identify Offender Risk

A validation study of one of the most commonly used tools, the Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (LS/CMI), demonstrated its ability to accurately identify offenders' risk of reoffending.¹

SOURCE: Andrews et al, 2004



1 What Are Risk/Needs Assessment Tools?

A risk/needs assessment tool is essentially a uniform report card that measures offenders' criminal risk factors and specific needs that, if addressed, will reduce the likelihood of future criminal activity.

Tools typically consist of a set of questions that guide face-to-face interviews with offenders, probing behaviors and attitudes that research shows are related to criminal reoffending. The questionnaire often is supplemented with an official records check, including prior arrests and incarcerations. Responses are statistically weighted, based on research that shows how strongly each item correlates with recidivism. The tool then calculates an overall score that classifies an individual's risk of reoffending. This risk level and accompanying information about an offender's unique needs can then inform decisions about the best course of action.

2 How Are These Tools Used?

Risk/needs assessment tools can be customized for use by different agencies at various decision points in the sentencing and corrections process.

- **Courts** use risk/needs instruments to help make pretrial bail and release decisions, sentencing and revocation decisions and to set conditions of supervision.
- **Probation and parole agencies** often use such tools to decide levels of supervision, determine the need for specialized treatment programs (such as substance abuse, mental health and cognitive skill building), develop an offender's supervision plan and inform decisions about sanctions and revocations.
- **Prison and jail systems** typically use risk tools to help set inmate security classification levels and identify which programs inmates should attend.
- **Parole boards** use the instruments to guide release decisions and to set conditions of supervision.

3 What Are Criminal Risk Factors?

Research has identified both changeable (dynamic) and unchangeable (static) risk factors related to criminal behavior. Studies have revealed seven dynamic risk factors closely associated with criminal conduct that can be assessed and altered through effective interventions.²

1. **Antisocial Personality Pattern**—impulsive, adventurous pleasure seeking, restlessly aggressive and irritable behavior
2. **Procriminal Attitudes**—offering rationalizations for crime and expressing negative attitudes toward the law
3. **Social Supports for Crime**—having criminal friends and being isolated from prosocial peers
4. **Substance Abuse**—abuse of alcohol and/or drugs
5. **Poor Family/Marital Relationships**—poor family relationships and inappropriate parental monitoring and disciplining
6. **School/Work Failure**—poor performance and low levels of satisfaction with school or work
7. **Lack of Prosocial Recreational Activities**—a lack of involvement in prosocial recreational and leisure activities

Research also has identified a number of static risk factors linked to a high risk of reoffending including age at first arrest, number of prior convictions and current offense.³

4 Why Is It Important to Differentiate Individuals by Risk Level?

Matching offenders to programs based on their risk levels is one of the keys to reducing recidivism. Research has revealed that certain intensive programs work very well with high-risk offenders but actually can increase recidivism rates among low-risk offenders (see Figure 2). One program, for example, cut recidivism for high-risk offenders by more than 25 percent but increased reincarceration of low-risk offenders by almost 18 percent.⁴ Researchers think this counterintuitive finding may occur because mixing risk groups exposes the lower-risk offenders to the more destructive behaviors of higher-risk offenders and jeopardizes prosocial relationships and productive community engagement they may have.⁵

Further, risk classifications help criminal justice officials maximize use of limited resources. Targeting higher-risk offenders with proven programs ensures that resources are concentrated on offenders with whom they can have the greatest impact.

5 How Effective Are Risk/Needs Tools?

Numerous studies have demonstrated that validated risk assessments accurately differentiate between high-, medium- and low-risk offenders. In other words, individuals classified as high risk reoffend at a higher rate than those classified as low risk.⁶

Risk/needs assessments have become a cornerstone of good correctional practice. Research consistently has shown that assessing each individual's risk of reoffending, matching supervision and treatment to an offender's risk level and targeting his or her unique criminal risk factors and needs with proven programs

significantly improves offender outcomes, reduces recidivism and enhances public safety.⁷ In fact, studies have demonstrated that evidence-based community supervision and treatment strategies consistently reduce recidivism as much or more than incarceration.⁸

6 What Tools Are Available?

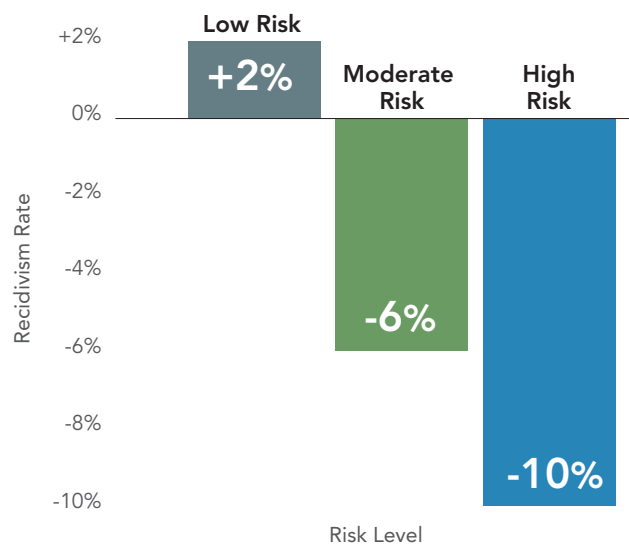
A wide range of instruments is available and careful consideration should be given to selecting or developing an appropriate risk/needs assessment. Many tools are available off the shelf, some of which measure only risks or needs while others assess both. There also are specialized instruments that assess the risk of

Figure 2

Targeting High Risk Offenders Maximizes Recidivism Reduction

A 2010 study demonstrated the effectiveness of matching offenders to programs by risk level. The study of 44 halfway house programs in Ohio found that the programs reduced recidivism for high-risk offenders by 10 percent but increased recidivism of low-risk offenders by two percent. One program decreased recidivism rates by more than 25 percent for high-risk offenders but increased new incarcerations by almost 18 percent for low-risk individuals.

SOURCE: Latessa et al, 2010



committing certain offenses (such as sex offenses and violent offenses) or specific areas of need (such as substance abuse and mental health). A number of agencies have opted to modify existing instruments or to develop tools themselves.

7 What Considerations Should Be Made When Implementing an Assessment Tool?

Effective implementation of a risk/needs assessment is critical to successful recidivism reduction. Each instrument must be validated to ensure that risk classifications accurately represent the likelihood of reoffending among the group of offenders for which it will be used. Corrections agencies should ensure that tools are widely available, standardized and routinely used to inform decisions affecting case planning and offender management. Staff should have consistent access to training opportunities, and officials should regularly assess whether supervising officers are successfully reducing the risk level of their charges. In larger agencies, the use of a centralized assessment unit can improve consistency and objectivity. Finally, because offender risk and need factors change over time, offenders must be reassessed periodically to ensure accurate classification and to maximize efficient use of limited resources.

8 What Are the Challenges and Limitations of Risk/Needs Assessment?

- Risk/needs assessments cannot predict an individual's behavior with absolute precision. Inevitably there will be lower-risk offenders who reoffend and higher-risk offenders who do not reoffend. However, objective tools more accurately predict behavior than subjective assessments by individuals, making them critically important in helping agencies to classify and manage groups of offenders.
- Risk/needs assessments can help guide decisions, but they should not be dispositive. These tools serve as an anchor for decision-making, but professional discretion remains a critical component.
- Risk/needs instruments must be well designed, well implemented, validated and used routinely to inform decision-making. Staff must be adequately trained and supervised to ensure the assessment consistently and effectively informs decisions and drives case management plans.
- There is no one-size-fits-all risk assessment tool. Agencies frequently employ multiple tools to inform decision-making at points throughout the criminal justice process, and significant attention must be dedicated to ensuring that the appropriate instruments are selected or developed.

WHAT CAN POLICY MAKERS DO?

State policy makers across the country are putting research into action by passing legislation that requires their courts and corrections agencies to use evidence-based practices. Over the past few years, a number of states have passed comprehensive corrections reform packages that require the use of risk/needs assessment and are projected to save taxpayers millions of dollars. For example:

- **Arkansas:** The Public Safety Improvement Act of 2011, a comprehensive sentencing and corrections reform law, directs the Department of Community Correction to use risk/needs assessments to set conditions of supervision and to assign programming as part of an overall strategy for improving supervision practices.⁹ The full package is projected to save Arkansas \$875 million in averted prison costs through 2020.¹⁰
- **Kentucky:** The wide-ranging Public Safety and Offender Accountability Act of 2011 requires the courts and corrections authorities to incorporate risk/needs assessments to inform decisions at multiple points in the criminal justice process.¹¹ The Act further requires that 75 percent of state expenditures on individuals under community supervision be spent on evidence-based programming within five years. The state estimates the overall legislation will save \$422 million over 10 years.¹²
- **New Hampshire:** In 2010, the state legislature mandated the use of risk/needs assessments to inform decisions about the length of active supervision for all offenders on probation and parole.¹³ Along with the establishment of a new system for handling technical violations of supervision, this provision is expected to save the state nearly \$11 million over five years.¹⁴
- **South Carolina:** The legislature in 2010 required probation agents to conduct actuarial assessments of offenders' risks and needs, and make decisions about the type of supervision and services consistent with evidence-based practices. The law was part of the Omnibus Crime Reduction and Sentencing Reform Act,¹⁵ which is projected to save the state \$241 million over five years.¹⁶

Endnotes

- ¹ Don Andrews, James Bonta and Stephen Wormith, *Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (LS/CMI): An offender assessment system (user's manual)*. Toronto: Multi-Health Systems, 2004.
- ² James Bonta and Donald A. Andrews, *Risk-Need-Responsivity Model for Offender Assessment and Rehabilitation* (Ottawa: Public Safety Canada, 2007), http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/res/cor/rep/_fl/Risk_Need_2007-06_e.pdf; Donald A. Andrews, James Bonta and Steve Wormith, "The Recent Past and Near Future of Risk and/or Need Assessment," *Crime & Delinquency* 52 (2006): 7-27.
- ³ James F. Austin, "The Proper and Improper Use of Risk Assessment in Corrections," *Federal Sentencing Reporter* 16 (2004): 1-6.
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- ⁵ Christopher T. Lowenkamp and Edward J. Latessa, "Understanding the Risk Principle: How and Why Correctional Interventions Can Harm Low-Risk Offenders," In *Topics in Community Corrections: Assessment Issues for Managers*, series edited by the National Institute of Corrections (Washington, DC: National Institute of Corrections, 2004), 3, <http://nicic.gov/pubs/2004/period265.pdf>.
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- ⁸ Paul Gendreau, Claire Goggin, Francis T. Cullen, and Donald A. Andrews, "The Effects of Community Sanctions and Incarceration on Recidivism," *Forum on Corrections Research* 12 (2001): 10-13, http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/pblct/forum/e122/122c_e.pdf; Mark W. Lipsey and Francis T. Cullen, "The Effectiveness of Correctional Rehabilitation: A Review of Systematic Reviews," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 3 (2007): 297-320.
- ⁹ Arkansas SB750 (2011).
- ¹⁰ Pew Center on the States, *Arkansas's 2011 Public Safety Reform: Legislation to Reduce Recidivism and Curtail Prison Growth* (Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts, July 2011), http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Pew_Arkansas_brief.pdf.
- ¹¹ Kentucky HB463 (2011).
- ¹² Pew Center on the States, *2011 Kentucky Reforms Cut Recidivism, Costs" Broad Bill Enacts Evidence-Based Strategies* (Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts, July 2011), http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/2011_Kentucky_Reforms_Cut_Recidivism.pdf.
- ¹³ New Hampshire SB500 (2010).
- ¹⁴ Council of State Governments Justice Center, *New Hampshire: Implementing the Strategy* (New York: Council of State Governments Justice Center), http://justicereinvestment.org/states/new_hampshire/how-nh/.
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- ¹⁶ Pew Center on the States, *South Carolina's Public Safety Reform: Legislation Enacts Research-Based Strategies to Cut Prison Growth and Costs* (Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts, June 2010), http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/PSPP_South_Carolina_brief.pdf?n=5221.

Launched in 2006, the Public Safety Performance Project seeks to help states advance fiscally sound, data-driven policies and practices in sentencing and corrections that protect public safety, hold offenders accountable and control corrections costs.

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