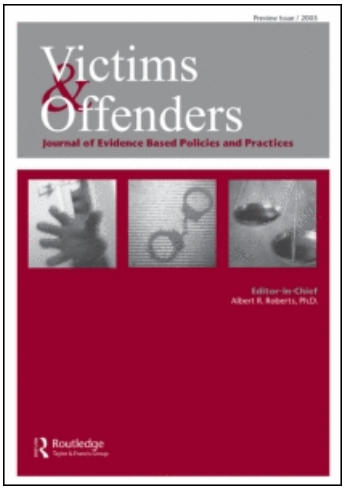

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The Role of Offender Risk Assessment: A Policy Maker Guide

Edward J. Latessa[a]; Brian Lovins[a]
[a] School of Criminal Justice, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

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The Role of Offender Risk Assessment: A Policy Maker Guide

Edward J. Latessa and Brian Lovins

School of Criminal Justice, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

Abstract: One of the foundations of developing effective correctional practices is the adoption of a validated risk assessment instrument. Risk assessments offer correctional agencies a clear understanding of the level of risk an offender poses to the community, as well as appropriate targets for change. Agencies that adopt a valid risk assessment recognize that the resources it takes to conduct a risk assessment are offset by the time savings it provides in the long run. The recent advancement from second and third generation tools to fourth generation tools provides even more utility for correctional agencies. Fourth generation tools offer an integrated case plan system that is driven directly from the results of the assessment and assists correctional staff in targeting those criminogenic needs that are identified as moderate risk to high risk. Although adopting a validated risk assessment is only one step in conducting evidence based interventions, it is a necessary step to ensure that agencies are targeting the right offender and are addressing the right targets.

Keywords: prisons, risk assessment, static indicators, dynamic indicators, assessment methods

INTRODUCTION

One of the foundations of developing effective correctional practices and programs is the need to conduct risk assessment. According to national and international professional correctional organizations (National Institute of Corrections, American Probation and Parole Association, International Community Corrections Association, American Correctional Association, and the American Association of Community Justice Professionals), offender risk assessment is a component of best practices. The concept of risk assessment is really quite simple and can be understood through one basic question—"What is the probability that this person will reoffend?"

Address correspondence to Edward J. Latessa, PO 210389, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH 45221. E-mail: edward.latessa@uc.edu

Being able to classify offenders into risk levels (e.g., low, moderate, high, very high) has come a long way over the years, and has evolved from using "gut feelings" and intuition to working with instruments that focused primarily on past behavior (static indicators)—to what are now called fourth generation instruments that include changeable or dynamic indicators as well as an integrated case plan system (Bonta & Wormith, 2008). We will discuss this progression of risk assessment in much greater detail later, but for now it is important to review why assessment is so critical to the correctional enterprise.

Why Is Offender Assessment Important?

The importance of using validated and objective offender assessment tools cannot be overstated. Assessment is the engine that drives effective interventions with offenders, and is important for a number of reasons (Latessa, 2004). Offender assessment

- helps identify the offenders most at risk for recidivating,
- identifies who needs the most intervention (or none at all),
- identifies crime producing needs that should be targeted for change,
- helps guide decision making by providing more information in a systematic manner,
- helps reduce bias by following objective criteria rather than personal intuition and judgment,
- improves the placement of offenders,
- improves the utilization of resources, and
- enhances public safety.

What Is the National Picture?

Risk assessment is used at some level in all states, and across a wide range of correctional settings—including pretrial, probation, parole, community corrections, and prisons. Risk assessment is used by courts to help make bond and pretrial decisions, to arrive at sentencing decisions, and during revocation hearings. Probation and parole agencies use risk assessment to decide levels of supervision (i.e., intensive, regular, or even nonreporting) and placement in programs (e.g., substance abuse, day reporting centers, halfway houses). Parole boards often use risk assessment to help make release decisions, and prison and jail systems use it to help develop inmate classification systems and to decide which offenders should receive programs or be granted early release (Holsinger, Lurigio, & Latessa, 2001).

A national survey of probation and parole agencies concerning the use and practices surrounding offender assessment (Jones, Johnson, Latessa, & Travis, 1999) found that the vast majority of community correctional agencies reported using some actuarial instrument to assess and classify offenders, among a number of other findings.

- Almost 75% of probation and parole agencies and about 56% of community corrections service providers reported that they assess offender risk using standardized and objective instruments.
- Large agencies were more likely to assess offenders than small agencies.
- More that 83% of the respondents reported that it was "absolutely" or "very necessary" to classify on risk, and 66% reported it was necessary to classify on needs.
- Nearly all respondents agreed that offender assessment made their jobs easier, benefits the offender, creates a more professional environment, helped staff make better decisions, increased the effectiveness of service delivery, and enhanced fairness in decision making.
- Use of these tools addressed officer workload (75%), staff deployment (54%), development of specialized caseloads (47%), and helped with sentencing decisions (20%).

While there is a good deal of evidence that risk assessment is widely used and valued in corrections, there is a great deal of variation in its application and implementation. For example, some states have adopted and implemented standardized assessment tools that are used throughout the state and across a wide range of settings, while others have taken a less systematic approach. Examples of states that have developed or adopted risk assessment at a major level of the correctional system include Arizona, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Washington, Idaho, Colorado, North Dakota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Iowa, Georgia, New Jersey, Illinois, and Indiana. Noteworthy is Ohio, which has recently funded a project to develop a statewide risk assessment process that includes all levels of the correctional system (from pretrial to parole), and will include a Web-based application that will allow correctional staff across the state to assess offenders using the same tools.

What Is Risk Assessment?

It is important that we define the concept of "risk" as it pertains to offender recidivism. For some, "risk" is a concept associated with the seriousness of the crime—for example, in the sense that a felon is higher risk than a misdemeanant. In actuality, however, though a felon has been convicted of a

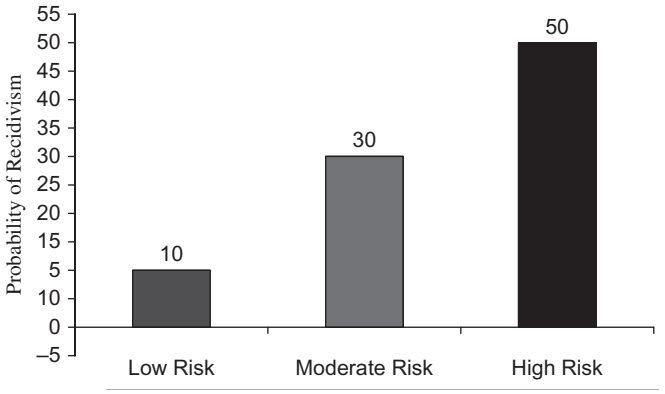

Figure 1: Example of distribution of risk scores and recidivism.

more serious offense than a misdemeanant, their relative risk of reoffending may have nothing to do with the seriousness of the crime.

For our purposes, "risk" refers to the probability of reoffending. A low risk offender is one with a relatively low probability of committing a new offense (i.e., relatively prosocial people with few risk factors), while a high risk offender has a much greater probability (i.e., more antisocial with many risk factors). The application of the concept in corrections is similar to that in most actuarial sciences. For example, life insurance is cheaper for a nonsmoker in his 40s than a smoker of the same age. The reason insurance costs more for the smoker is that smokers have a risk factor that is significantly correlated with health problems. Similarly, an offender who uses drugs and is unemployed has a higher chance of reoffending than someone who does not use drugs and has steady employment. Figure 1 shows how a distribution of offenders might be classified according to risk. Note that the probability of someone in the low risk category reoffending is 10%, for moderate risk it is 30%, while for high risk it is 50%.

RISK, NEEDS, AND RESPONSIVITY

Three important principles in the assessment process are risk, needs, and responsivity. Below we will briefly examine each principle.

Risk Principle

In 1990, Andrews, Bonta, and Hoge discussed the importance of the risk principle as it relates to the assessment of offenders. There are three important elements to the principle.

- Target those offenders with a higher probability of recidivism.
- Provide the most intensive treatment to higher risk offenders.
- Intensive treatment for lower risk offenders can increase recidivism.

Since 1990, considerable research has investigated how adhering to the risk principle can impact a correctional program's effectiveness. Here is one way to think of the risk principle—suppose that half of the offenders that are released from prison never return. Which half are we worried about? The obvious answer is the half that will return to prison, and this is the group to whom we want to provide the most intensive programs and services (since they pose the greatest risk to reoffend). The more troubling aspect of the risk principle is the fact that providing intensive interventions for low risk offenders can actually increase failure rates (Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2004). Figure 2 shows effects on recidivism rates when we target high risk and low risk offenders.

The question that arises is why a correctional intervention or program can produce a reduction in recidivism for higher risk offenders, but have undesired and unintended consequences for lower risk offenders? The increased failure rates of low risk offenders can largely be understood when considering the following three explanations. First, when we place low risk offenders in the more intense correctional interventions we are likely exposing them to higher risk offenders—and the learning that is transmitted is often antisocial. Practically speaking, placing high risk and low risk offenders together is never a good strategy. If you had a son or daughter that got into some trouble would you want them placed in a group with high risk offenders? Second, when we take lower risk offenders—who by definition are fairly prosocial (if not they would not be considered low risk)—and place them in a highly structured,

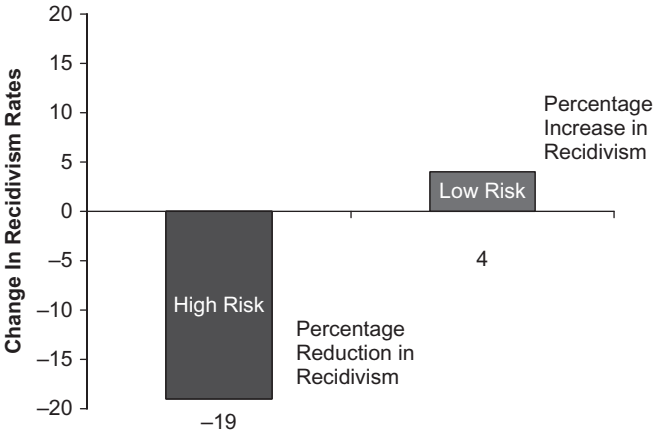

Figure 2: The risk principle & correctional intervention results from meta analysis.

restrictive program, we actually disrupt the factors that make them low risk. For example, if most prosocial people were placed in a correctional treatment program for six months they would lose their job, experience family disruption, and their prosocial attitudes and contacts would be cut off and replaced with antisocial thoughts and peers—their neighbors would probably not have a "Welcome Home from the Correctional Program" party when they got out. In other words, risk would be increased due to the disruption of prosocial networks. Third, other factors such as IQ, intellectual functioning, and maturity might be at work. It could be the case that there are some low functioning, low risk offenders that are manipulated by more sophisticated, higher risk, predatory offenders (Lowenkamp, Latessa, & Holsinger, 2006).

What all this means for corrections is that low risk offenders should be identified and excluded, as a general rule, from intensive correctional programs. The first step in meeting the risk principle is the identification of appropriate targets (higher risk offenders). To achieve this goal, agencies must assess offenders with standardized and objective risk assessment instruments. To be clear, this is not to imply that low risk offenders should not be held accountable for their actions—they did break the law. However, less intense, less intrusive interventions would be recommended since they are less costly and potentially less harmful.

Need Principle

Research by Andrews and Bonta (1998) and Gendreau, Little, and Goggin (1996) have identified eight major risk factors associated with criminal conduct.

1. antisocial/procriminal attitudes, values, and beliefs
2. procriminal associates and isolation from prosocial people
3. temperament and personality factors such being impulsive, adventurous, and pleasure seeking
4. history of antisocial behavior
5. family factors such as family criminality or lack of caring and cohesiveness
6. low levels of educational, vocational, or financial achievement
7. lack of prosocial leisure activities
8. abuse of drugs and alcohol

While these are all considered major, it is important to note that the first four are referred to as the "Big Four" and are considered the strongest risk factors among the set.

If we look carefully at these areas we can see that some can be influenced or changed while others cannot. Those that cannot be changed are

called "static." Examples include prior record or family criminality. For instance, early onset of criminal behavior is a very good predictor of future behavior, but it is a risk factor that cannot be changed—if you were first arrested at age ten you will always have been first arrested at age ten. Similarly, if your father was in prison it may help explain why you are in trouble (i.e., social learning), but the fact that your father was in prison cannot be changed.

Those factors that can be changed are called "dynamic." They include factors like who an offender associates with, attitudes and values, a lack of problem solving skills, substance use, and employment status. All these are correlated with recidivism, and all can be targeted for change. These dynamic factors are also called *criminogenic needs*: crime producing factors that are strongly correlated with risk. Combining static and dynamic factors together give us the best picture of the overall risk of recidivism (Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2005b). We can illustrate this by showing the risk factors associated with having a heart attack—age (over 50), sex (male), family history of heart problems, high blood pressure, being overweight, lack of exercise, stress, smoking, and high cholesterol. Some of these factors are static and others are dynamic. To *understand* your risk you would factor in all of them; to *affect*—and lower—your risk you would focus on the dynamic ones.

Applying the same logic to effective correctional intervention, researchers have come up with the need principle as a way to choose the "what" to target for change in an offender—namely, dynamic factors or criminogenic needs that are highly correlated with criminal conduct. Programs should assess and target crime producing needs, such as antisocial attitudes, antisocial peer associations, substance abuse, lack of empathy, lack of problem solving and self-control skills, and other factors that are highly correlated with criminal conduct (Dowden & Andrews, 1999).

It is important to note that most offenders are not at high risk for recidivism because they have one risk or need factor, but rather are high risk because they have multiple factors. As a result, programs that target only one may not produce the desired effects (Lowenkamp, Latessa, & Holsinger, 2006). For example, while unemployment is correlated with criminal conduct for many probationers and parolees, by itself it is not that strong of a risk factor. After all, if most of us lost our job we would not start selling drugs or robbing people; we would simply start looking for another job. But if you think a job is for someone else, if you have no problem letting someone else support you, or if you think you can make more in a day illegitimately than someone can make in a month legitimately, then being unemployed does add considerably to your risk of offending. Identifying criminogenic needs is an important part of offender risk assessment—it tells us what to focus on to reduce risk.

Responsivity Principle

In addition to risk factors, there are often personal characteristics of an individual that should be assessed, since these factors can affect their engagement in treatment. These would include areas like mental and emotional problems, cognitive functioning, and level of motivation and readiness to change. For example, an offender might be moderate risk to offend, but due to a low level of cognitive functioning they would not be successful in a program that required normal functioning. Assessment of these areas can often improve the placement of offenders and the effectiveness of correctional treatment.

ACTUARIAL VERSUS CLINICAL ASSESSMENT

The two basic ways to assess offenders are through actuarial (also called statistical) and clinical assessment. Actuarial risk assessment is similar to what insurance companies use to calculate rates. Actuarial instruments are based on statistical analysis of records and other information, resulting in the development of probability tables: if you score X, you have an X chance of reoffending. On the other hand, clinical assessment usually involves gathering information about the offender and then using experience, skills, and judgment to form a conclusion about the likelihood of success or failure. Studies dating back over 50 years have consistently demonstrated that actuarial prediction is more accurate than clinical prediction (Meehl, 1954).

TYPES OF ASSESSMENT TOOLS

Assessment tools in corrections can be grouped into three basic categories: screening instruments, comprehensive risk/need assessments, and specialized tools.

Screening instruments are usually quick to complete and easy to use. They consist primarily of static items (e.g., prior arrests) and can be useful for in-or-out decisions (detain, release on recognizance, etc.). Static instruments can also be useful to sort offenders into risk categories (i.e., low, moderate, or high) but beyond that they have limited utility, since they do little to identify criminogenic factors.

Comprehensive risk/need assessment tools cover all major risk and need factors. They take longer to administer (and thus cost more), require more extensive training, and produce levels of risk/need that is correlated with outcome measures like recidivism. These instruments are also more dynamic and can be useful in reassessment (to determine if risk has changed after some intervention or program). The advantage of these types of tools is that they facilitate the development of case and treatment plans since they take into account the full range of factors associated with risk (Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2005a).

Specialized tools are usually used to assess specific domains (like substance abuse) or special populations (i.e., sex offenders, mentally ill offenders, psychopaths, etc.). These instruments may require special training to administer and should be used in conjunction with more comprehensive risk/need assessments. For example, if your risk/need assessment indicates that substance abuse is a contributing factor to an offender's behavior, then a more detailed assessment of this area using an instrument specifically designed for the purpose may be in order.

In many instances jurisdictions develop an assessment process that involves all three types. For example, a screening instrument might be used at pretrial, or to screen out low risk offenders from further assessment. For those offenders who continue to move through the system and are higher risk, a more comprehensive assessment tool should be used. Specialized assessment will also be used on an "as needed" basis. Following this approach can increase efficiency, since not all offenders will be thoroughly assessed, but those offenders who appear to pose the greatest risk to reoffend will be examined much more closely (Flores, Russell, Latessa, & Travis, 2005).

METHODS OF ASSESSMENT

There are several different approaches that are used for the assessment process, depending on the instrument selected. Some instruments, like screening tools, are based primarily on file or record information—although the person being assessed may be asked some questions as well. The assessor examines the file or record, checks the appropriate indicators, and then adds up the score and determines the appropriate risk category. More comprehensive assessment tools may require both file and record information and a structured interview with the offender or a questionnaire to be completed. Most assessment tools involve the gathering of information about the offender (through file review, interviews, questionnaires, third party information, etc.). In addition to questions about the nature of the assessment tool itself, there are a number of practical issues to consider.

- What will the tool be used for?
- How long does it take to complete the tool?
- How much training is involved?
- What is the cost?
- How complex is the tool to use and understand?
- When will it be done?
- Where will it be done?

- Who will do it?
- What is the level of staff commitment to using the instrument?
- Is the assessment tool reliable (do we get consistent results)?
- Is the assessment valid (does it measure what we want it to measure)?

The last two questions highlight important considerations regarding the use of assessment tools—reliability and validity.

RELIABILITY

One of the considerations involved in the administration of a risk assessment tool is reliability, or the consistency of the assessment tool. A reliable tool results in the same decisions being made about the same kind of offenders irrespective of who is using the tool. This means that if different people assess the same offender they should come to similar conclusions about the risk of reoffending. This is usually easier to achieve with static instruments since they often depend on file or historical information. Reliability is more of an issue with instruments that include dynamic factors (such as gauging the attitudes or values of the offender), which is why training is so important when using these types of tools. An instrument that is not reliable cannot be valid, but an instrument can be reliable but not valid—we can all come to the same conclusion but all be wrong. When this occurs the instrument is not considered valid (Lowenkamp, Holsinger, & Latessa, 2004).

VALIDITY

While there are different forms of validity, the one we are most concerned about with risk assessment tools is predictive validity—the ability of the instrument to predict what we think it is predicting. Predictive validity is usually measured as the correlation between the score on the tool and its correlation with some outcome measure, such as a new conviction; the stronger the correlation the more valid the tool. Of course, no instrument is 100% accurate—however strong a case can be made for actuarial risk assessment, it is not a perfect science. Although statistical risk assessment reduces uncertainty about an offender's probable future conduct, it is subject to errors and should be regarded as advisory rather than peremptory (Clear, 1985). Even with large data sets and advanced analytical techniques, the best models are usually able to predict recidivism with about 70% accuracy (Petersilia & Turner, 1987)—provided it is completed by trained staff. Assessment results are invariably susceptible to two types of classification errors: false positives and false negatives. False positives occur when offenders who are predicted to fail

actually succeed, whereas false negatives occur when predicted successes actually fail. False negatives are more visible and damaging because they can actually involve new offenses that cause harm to victims and jeopardize public safety. False negatives are potentially very costly; hence most assessment strategies err on the conservative side. Controlling false positives and false negatives is important in order to maximize the utility of assessment practices (Farrington, 1987).

THE RECENT PROGRESSION OF RISK ASSESSMENT

Although the criminal justice field has moved past "gut feelings" as its primary form of assessment, there still remains significant variation in the implementation of risk assessment. In Ohio, for example, the Ohio Department of Youth Services conducted a survey of the 88 counties and found that there were 77 different risk assessments used to assess youth's risk to reoffend. Assessments ranged from homegrown, unstructured assessments to the Youthful Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (Modry & Gies, 2005). Even among academics there is strong discourse between two specific camps.[1]

The first camp, lead primarily by Christopher Baird, argues that the current fourth generation risk assessment is problematic and that criminogenic needs should not be included in the measurement of risk. Instead he argues that risk should be measured by historical variables (or static factors) and that needs should be separated and assessed using need-specific assessments (Baird, 2009). The second camp, lead by Don Andrews and his colleagues, posits that fourth generation tools are not only practical but are just as predictive as "risk only" measures (Bonta & Wormith, 2008). Depending on in which camp one resides, there are either very few advancements (Baird camp) or significant advancements (Andrews) in assessing risk over the past ten years. For this reason, the following section will briefly discuss the advancement of risk assessment from second and third generation tools to fourth generation risk/needs assessments.[2]

For the past 20 years, corrections have focused primarily on the implementation of second and third generation risk assessment instruments. Though these instruments have demonstrated over time they are valid measures of recidivism, they have not been successfully integrated into practice. Lowenkamp, Latessa, and Holsinger (2006) suggest that until a risk assessment translates academic-based endeavors into practical measures of risk, the system will not fully adopt risk/need assessments.

Bonta and Wormith (2008) argue a similar point, suggesting that the utility of risk assessment is directly correlated to the eagerness of officers to adopt it. This is where the fourth generation tools provide a significant step forward compared to second and third generation tools. Fourth generation tools are designed to integrate the results of the risk/need assessment directly into the

case plan process to ensure that agents of change target those criminogenic needs that are tied specifically to reoffending. Examples of fourth generation tools are the Youthful Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI), the Ohio Youth Assessment System (OYAS), the Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (LS/CMI), and the Ohio Risk Assessment System (ORAS).

These instruments use dynamic risk factors to measure initial risk and then reassess on these items to determine if the offender has made any significant changes in the risk they pose to society. In addition to targets of change, the fourth generation tools allow for departments to focus their resources on those domains (broad areas of need) that are moderate to high risk. Ultimately, if the criminal justice system can significantly reduce the recidivism rates for offenders, this will result in increased public safety. The fourth generation tools provide agents of change with a specific "road map" to address the needs of the offenders, manage limited resources, and protect public safety.

OBSTACLES TO GOOD PRACTICE

Here are some of the more common obstacles that exist with regard to offender assessment.

1. Offenders are assessed, but the process ignores important factors. Sometimes this is because the tool selected is comprised mainly of static predictors, or the assessment process focuses on one or two domains (like substance abuse) to the exclusion of other important risk factors.

2. Offenders are assessed, but the process does not distinguish quantifiably determined levels (i.e., high, moderate, low). This is common with narrative assessments, and the result is often that the summaries all read the same—e.g., "offender is a risk to reoffend unless they get substance abuse treatment." This type of information tells us little about the actual risk of reoffending or the level of need in specific areas. This is common with clinical assessment processes.

3. Even when offenders are comprehensively assessed, the results are not used—everyone gets the same treatment. As we will discuss below, adopting a risk assessment tool is only one step in the process. If the information is not going to be used, then why assess?

4. Staff members often are not adequately trained in use of the instruments, or they are only trained when the new instrument is selected. When a decision to use a new instrument is made everyone is trained, but as time goes on and new employees are hired little refresher training may be

done—new staff simply learn how to use the tools by watching the older staff. The result is that reliability and validity suffer, and stakeholders lose confidence in the results of the assessment.

5. Staff resistance is one of the most persistent obstacles to overcome. Some of the common refrains include "I just need to talk to them for five minutes to determine their level of risk," "we don't have time to conduct an assessment," "they are all high risk," and "they all get the same treatment anyway so why assess them?" While staff resistance can be a challenge, it is not insurmountable; as the Jones survey found, most community correctional agencies understand the importance and value of using a valid and reliable risk assessment tool.

SOME POINTS TO CONSIDER

To avoid these and other mistakes and to derive the full value from assessments, there are some points to consider.

- There is no "one size fits all" assessment tool. Some domains or types of offenders will require specialized assessments, such as sex offenders or mentally disturbed individuals. In addition the use or purpose will vary. For example, the assessment tool for making a decision about whether to grant pretrial release may be different from one for making a decision about whether to grant probation.
- Actuarial assessment is more accurate than clinical assessment, but no process is perfect and there will always be false positives and false negatives; sometimes low risk offenders reoffend, and sometimes high risk offenders are successful.
- Assessment is usually not a "one-time" event, especially if the offender is under some form of community control. Offender risk and need factors change, so it is important to consider assessment as an ongoing process.
- Assessments help guide decisions, but they do not make them—professional discretion is part of good assessment-aided decision making.
- While the new dynamic assessment tools can produce more useful information, they require more effort to ensure reliability—they require staff training and continual monitoring of the assessment process. Like just about everything we do, fidelity and quality assurance makes a difference.
- Remember, good risk assessment serves a number of functions, and helps guide decisions by providing reliable information in a systematic and objective manner. It can be the cornerstone of a more effective, efficient, and just system.

- Develop a flexible process that expands as needed—higher risk offenders need more assessment.
- Standardize the process and instruments so that everyone is speaking the same language with regard to risk assessment
- Regardless of the assessment tool used, staff should be thoroughly trained on the rationale and use of a risk assessment tool. Proper training will ensure that the staff understand the advantages of risk assessment, and that they use the tool in an appropriate and consistent manner. The level and amount of staff "buy in" can drastically affect the level of success in implementing a risk assessment process or tool (Lowenkamp, Holsinger, & Latessa, 2004).
- Following training, agency administrators should establish quality assurance processes such as periodic audits of assessments, refresher training, or even certification of assessors.
- Use the assessment results to develop case supervision and treatment plans and to assign offenders to programs.
- Share information with service providers so that they understand the risk of the offender they are involved with as well as the criminogenic factors that need to be targeted.
- An assessment tool should be validated on the population for which it is being used. There are several widely used actuarial instruments that have been validated in numerous settings and across several subgroups (i.e., males, females, different racial and ethnic groups). Nonetheless, agencies should still analyze assessment results based on the population for which the tool is being used.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF OFFENDER ASSESSMENT?

Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of risk assessment in developing effective correctional programming, but what is not known is how much is saved through the use of assessment tools. Undoubtedly there is a cost savings when we are able to divert low risk offenders from intensive and costly correctional programs. There is also the matter of improving public protection by identifying those offenders who post the greatest risk of continuing their criminal behavior. When we are able to identify the higher risk offender, providing an appropriate correctional response that can reduce that risk, we have achieved a level of public protection through risk reduction. One of the major benefits of offender assessment and classification is that it allows agencies to allocate resources and staff more optimally and effectively (Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2005).

WHAT IS THE COST OF AN ASSESSMENT TOOL?

There are a number of costs to consider when implementing a risk assessment tool. These include cost of the instruments, costs of training, staff time to administer the tool, possible automation, and validation studies. As for the cost of the tool itself, it depends on whether an agency chooses a proprietary instrument or a nonproprietary (public domain) instrument. While the former incur a per unit or license cost to use, they have several advantages—including regular upgrades of the instrument, automated versions of the tools, and technical assistance from the vendor. The exact cost usually depends on the volume used and can range between one and a couple of dollars per assessment. Some agencies have elected to develop their own instruments, usually through contracting with a consultant, in which case they "own" the tool and can use it without charge. For large agencies this may be a viable option; however, development and validation can take several years to complete. Whether a public domain or proprietary tool is used, training cost, time required for administration, and automation costs all need to be considered.

The implementation of an actuarial risk assessment tool is a daunting task, particularly in a large jurisdiction or organization, and the decision of what instrument to use can be perplexing enough without the focus on issues of consistency, reliability, validity, training, and quality assurance. Most experts, however, believe that the potential benefits of using a risk assessment instrument far outweigh the costs, particularly over a long period of time.

NOTES

1. Although it could be argued that there is a third camp lead by Barbara Bloom (2000) and Meda Chesney-Lind (2000) regarding the appropriateness of actuarial risk assessments for females, the purpose of this paper is to not debate the appropriateness of risk assessment, but instead provide a review of the advancements in assessing risk over the past ten years.

2. This paper's focus is to outline the use of risk assessment, the conditions in which risk assessment is appropriate, and the advancements of risk assessment over the past ten years. For this reason, we will not be comparing and contrasting second generation tools with third and fourth generation tools. For further critiques of these tools see Baird (2009).

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