

CHIEF PROBATION OFFICERS OF CALIFORNIA



Risk Assessment **Enhancing Offender Success and** **Protecting Public Safety**

California probation departments have been on the forefront of shaping public safety policy with the successful use of evidence-based practices which employ the use of risk assessment. Throughout probation departments around the state there has been a strong commitment to use evidence-based practices to match offenders' needs with appropriate services and to structure supervision around an offender's risk to offend.

With 70% of the adult offenders sentenced for felonies receiving a term of supervision, risk assessment provides a tremendous tool for probation officers to assist them in case-management decisions for offenders reentering the community from jail or prison, as well as throughout an offender probation supervision term.¹ Risk assessments provide critical information to probation departments to know where to prioritize resources towards higher risk offenders and to refer people to programs and services most likely to address an offender's needs and reduce recidivism. This brief looks at how risk assessments are used and why they are a useful tool to enhance public safety by reducing recidivism.

What is risk and needs assessment?

Risk and Needs Assessment uses information gathered by probation officers and criminal history to determine the potential an offender poses for committing a new crime, as well as what needs should be addressed through programs or services (mental health needs, substance abuse, education) to reduce an offender's likelihood to re-offend.

Actuarial risk assessment tools look at a mix of criminal history as well as factors that can change with the successful implementation of evidence-based practices. As they have become more sophisticated, tools now

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also include information designed to help guide interventions that can impact an offender’s changing and unchanging factors at various points through re-assessment.^{2,3} This approach gives probation officers information about what interventions will best reduce future criminality, and helps guide officers in targeting those risk factors which produces a cost efficient and effective crime reduction strategy.

California probation departments employ a variety of actuarial risk assessment tools to determine the likelihood of re-offense by a person granted probation, Mandatory Supervision, or released from prison under Post Release Community Supervision.



Despite having different names, most tools contain similar key elements and have their origins in actuarial science. The majority of tools contain “static” or unchangeable criminal history items (e.g., age at first conviction, type of conviction, number of jail/prison

commitments, supervision failures/revocations) along with “dynamic” or changeable factors (e.g., education, employment, residential stability, substance abuse, mental health disorders, family/relationship circumstances, etc.). These dynamic factors can change as probation interventions are appropriately applied.

A typical assessment contains a mix of identified dynamic risk/needs areas, with a measurement of the relative need for an intervention. Although offenders may need a wide range of services, research shows that services should focus on the “Big 4” criminogenic need areas (offender factors that have a strong correlation with future criminality): anti-social attitudes, anti-social peers, antisocial personality issues, and impulse control.⁴ “Non-criminogenic” needs can be thought of as services that address “social functioning factors” which help stabilize offenders across a spectrum of various domains, e.g., housing, education, basic hygiene, medication management, etc. Essentially, these are life skills that have a lesser correlation to future criminality, but may be barriers to success on supervision.

Risk tools use a series of questions, analyzed using an algorithm, that can predict likelihood of re-offense and help probation departments focus their limited resources to have the greatest impact on reducing recidivism. The predictive validity of a risk tool will never be 100%, but it is an essential tool to probation officers in the overall picture of supervision and recidivism reduction.

How risk and needs assessment is used

In the context of case management, assessment tools are not used to define an offender sentence or term of incarceration. Rather, these tools are used to determine supervision levels as well as intensity and frequency of probation officer contact and treatment and program involvement, and to address risk levels.

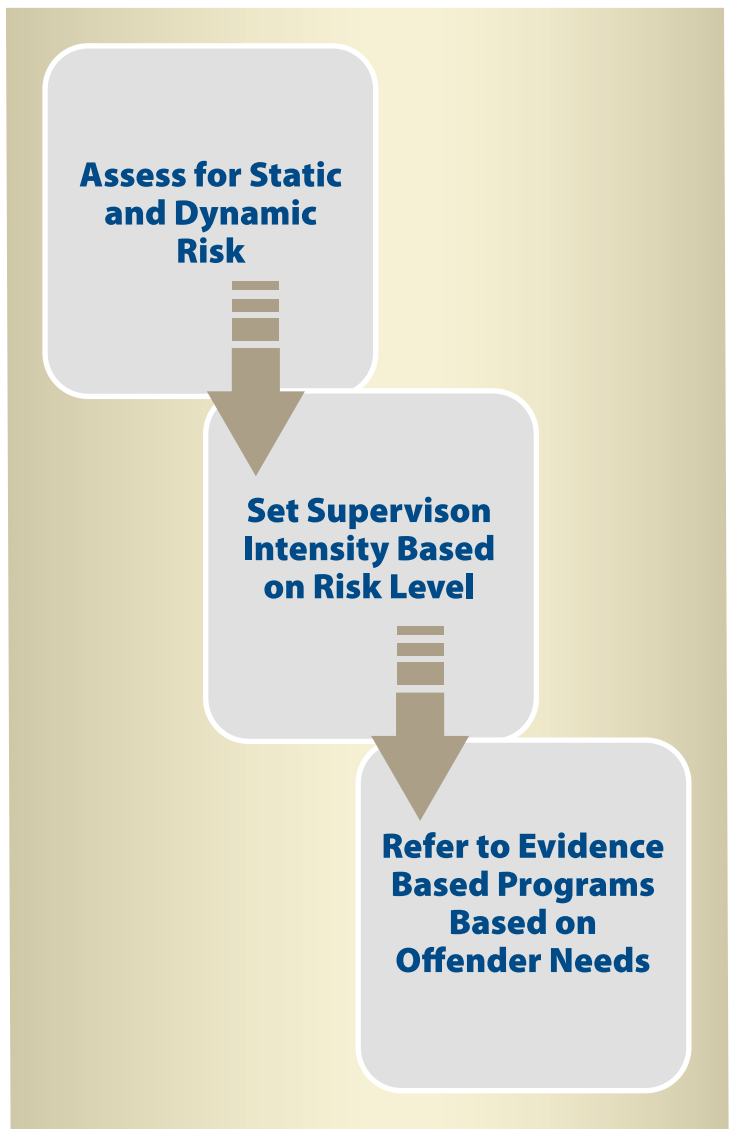
Assessment then drives development of case plans, which are dynamic action plans for supervision. Each case plan is individualized to the needs of the offender, and modified based on completion of goals and/or identification of new risk/need factors.

Effective case planning relies on several key factors:

1. Use of valid, and consistently applied risk/needs assessment tools;
2. Departmental policies requiring case plan goals and objectives target identified criminogenic risks/needs, tailored to the individual offender;
3. Use of research-based interventions, implemented with fidelity; and
4. Staff trained in crafting case plans with offender input, using "SMART" goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-specific).

For example, offenders assessed as lower risk might be put on a caseload with less interaction with an officer and fewer mandated services, while a higher

risk person may be put on a more intensive caseload demanding more interaction with a probation officer as well as mandated services. In addition, case reviews and audits by supervisory staff help ensure consistency and compliance with protocols and policies. The results of case reviews and audits provide necessary feedback to both the officer and department management about the effectiveness of the policies, protocols and services and interventions in relation to probationer success and accountability.



Risk Assessments: Reducing Public Safety Risk, While Addressing Offender Needs

Criminal justice research has shown that combining risk-based probation monitoring with effective treatment and programming will yield recidivism reductions.⁵

However, evidence-based risk determinations and program referrals are only the first steps. Programs must also deliver high quality, effective services, with fidelity to proven methods or innovative approaches based in sound theory. Determining the level, range, and intensity of services is critical for success. For county planning purposes, use of the aggregate needs of offender populations offers insight into the amount and type of services needed in a jurisdiction. By using aggregate needs assessment findings on the front end to create a menu of services for a county, offenders are more likely to be placed in the most appropriate program, at the outset of supervision, thereby reducing their likelihood to re-offend.

By adhering to evidence-based principles related to offender risk and need, research shows counties can develop supervision plans and allocate funding to provide appropriate levels of supervision and create quality programming across a number of risk/need areas, which result in better outcomes.

It is good public policy to use validated risk assessment tools to assign offenders to the proper level of probation monitoring, and to match them with interventions that address the specific criminal risk factors for the individual. By using these tools to place offenders on a risk-based level of supervision at the beginning of their time on supervision, probation departments can employ a level of supervision that keeps the public safe while providing treatment options based on the factors most likely to reduce recidivism. The research is clear - using validated risk assessment tools that facilitate application of effective case management principles and programs means less victimization, increased public safety, greater probationer success, and better use of taxpayer dollars.



For questions about this report, please contact: Cpoc@cpoc.org, or visit our website at www.cpoc.org/research-data.

¹ California Department of Justice (2015) Crime in California 2014. Criminal Statistics Center.

² Fourth Generation tools followed a progression of moving from only using professional judgement in the first generation, to using static information such as criminal history in the second generation, to including dynamic needs information in the third generation.

³ Andrews, D.A., Bonta, J., & Wormith, S. (2006). The recent past and near future of risk and/or need assessment. *Crime & Delinquency*, 52(1).

⁴ Bonta, J., Rugge, T., Scott, T. L., Bourgon, G., and Yessine, A. K. (2008). Exploring the Black Box of Community Supervision. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 47(3), 248-270

⁵ Aos, S., Miller, M., & Drake, E., (2006) Evidence-Based Adult Corrections Programs: What Works and What Does Not. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.