

Selecting the Appropriate Risk Assessment Tool

Introduction

Whether to purchase a commercially available risk assessment tool, adopt and tweak an existing tool, or develop a new tool for one's own jurisdiction, where to start is a challenge. In particular, there is a vast and growing world of risk assessment tools for justice practitioners to choose from, which can make tool selection a daunting undertaking. To make this more manageable, we offer a series of questions to help guide you in identifying the appropriate tool for your agency or system. Working through the following questions will help you assess how best to select a tool for use in your agency or jurisdiction (or develop a tool, if that is what you are considering).

What type of decision are you making?

You can't determine the right tool to use without being clear about how you want to use the risk assessment you choose. Risk assessment tools are designed to support good decision-making. This means the process of selecting a risk assessment tool begins with specifying the decision (or decisions) that you need to make. This will ensure you are choosing a tool that's the right fit for the job at hand.

	You want tools that measure	Tool type
Pretrial release/detention, bond setting, supervision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of failure to appear in court • Risk of being arrested for a new crime during pretrial release period 	Pretrial risk assessment
Diversion/Sentencing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk to reoffend in the community • Possibly risk of violent re-offending • Possibly dynamic risk factors/targets for change 	General recidivism risk assessment; violence risk assessment
Community supervision level-setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk to reoffend in the community • Risk of violent or sexual re-offending 	General recidivism risk assessment; violence and sexual offending risk assessments
Program assignment/case planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk to reoffend in the community • Dynamic risk factors/targets for change • Possibly responsivity factors 	Comprehensive risk/needs assessment
Setting level of treatment/care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treatment-specific factors (e.g. addiction severity) 	Specialized assessments
Discretionary release from incarceration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk to reoffend in the community • Possibly risk of violent re-offending 	General recidivism risk assessment; violence risk assessment
Responses to supervision violations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk to reoffend in the community • Risk of rule violations (non-compliance) 	General recidivism risk assessment

What population are you assessing?

Specific assessment tools have been developed for several populations, such as women and juveniles, because their risk factors may differ from justice populations in general. There are also assessments tailored to specific justice populations, such as pretrial defendants and probationers.

Do you need to predict specific types of outcomes?

Many assessment tools are designed to establish risk levels for reoffending of any kind, but high-stakes types of offending such as violent or sexual victimization are of particular concern to justice decision-makers. For decisions that require estimating these risks, there are tools that predict both general and violent offending, and specialized tools that predict the risk of violence, intimate partner violence, sexual offending, and other high-stakes types of offending.

Do you intend to reduce risk and want to measure progress?

Risk reduction involves efforts to change individual behavior and thereby make people less likely to reoffend, through programs and other interventions. The evidence to date indicates that effective risk reduction requires targeting programs to moderate- and high-risk individuals, focusing interventions on their criminogenic needs, those needs that are related to reoffending and can be changed through intervention (Austin 2006). Also, the effective supervision of individuals can lead to reduced opportunities for criminal activity. Therefore, comprehensive risk and needs assessments (i.e. third or fourth generation tools) that identify these needs and help monitor how the risk and needs levels change are appropriate to guide risk-reduction work. The information on needs can be used to match the right interventions to the right individual to guide case planning and goal-setting. The case management feature of these tools can help track the progress of individuals. If efforts are being undertaken to reduce an individual's risk, it's valuable to know whether the intended changes are occurring. In addition, one important consideration is to recognize that tools built on static factors, which are historical and/or cannot be changed, are not well suited to measure change via reassessment. Assessment tools that include changeable factors such as personality traits, drug and alcohol use, or employment status make it easier to detect change via reassessment.

How much staff time can you devote to assessment?

Most risk assessment tools require at least some direct information gathering from the person being assessed. This means that selection of a risk tool requires consideration of the staff resources necessary to administer it. Comprehensive risk and needs assessments in particular require an in-person interview, and take substantially longer to complete. They may also require extensive training, both initial and refresher, to ensure consistency across raters in areas like family functioning that are more subjective than gauging criminal history. All of this means that third and fourth generation risk assessments require greater investment of resources in the form of staff time than do simpler instruments based on static factors.

In response to this reality, many screeners have been developed that are intended to provide a gauge of risk level quickly and without having to devote much staff time. This may be sufficient for some decisions, and may also serve as the first step in a risk-based triage process, in which individuals at higher risk levels receive more comprehensive assessment to inform interventions. Another method to address this challenge is developing risk tools that can be completed using only administrative data, dispensing entirely with the in-person interview. This approach has efficiency benefits after the upfront investment in putting it in place. Not only can this approach be extended to automate the risk assessment process, leading to long-term cost savings, but it also eliminates the possibility of inconsistent

assessment practices across raters. However, it generally precludes the assessment of criminogenic needs, which cannot be properly established through administrative data.

What are current or potential partners using?

Risk assessments have been adopted in many criminal justice agencies, and the questions such assessments address are of interest to many different justice decision-makers. This makes it worthwhile to consider whether any partner or potential partner justice agencies already have risk assessment tools in place, and whether utilizing the same tool would be mutually beneficial. For example, a jail system interested in risk assessment to guide program placement decisions might consider utilizing the same risk assessment tool as the local probation department.

Consistency in tool use across agencies has several potential benefits. It can support consistency in approaches to things such as case planning and program interventions. It can also support a common understanding and frame of reference for decision-making, for example on parole condition-setting between the paroling authority and the parole supervision agency. It can reduce data collection burdens on assessors and individuals assessed if assessments can be shared across agencies. It can also create opportunities for cross-training and other resource-sharing.

Reference

Austin, James (2006). How much risk can we take-The misuse of risk assessment in corrections. *Federal Probation*, 70(2), pp. 58-63.

The **Public Safety Risk Assessment Clearinghouse** is a one-stop resource that provides practitioners and policymakers with up-to-date and objective information about risk assessment as well as training and technical assistance on its use.



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