

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Practitioner Compliance with Risk/Need Assessment Tools A Theoretical and Empirical Assessment

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Key Words: Risk/need; assessment; case management; compliance

Summary/Conclusions

This study explores community corrections practitioners' compliance and noncompliance with risk/need assessment tools. Researchers examined 1,087 survey responses from members of American Probation and Parole Association (APPA) to determine scoring practices and use of risk and need assessment tools by practitioners. While there were high levels of compliance among practitioners to complete the risk/need tools, ongoing use of the tools to make risk and need-based decisions varied.

Limitations of Information

The survey sample, an APPA membership list, may not have been representative of community corrections officers across the country. The study did not control for officers who used risk/needs assessments less frequently than other practitioners. The study did not control for different groups of practitioners (e.g. parole, probation, therapists). Individual factors (e.g. computer programmed assessments, type of assessment, validity of assessment) were not accounted for in the study.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Making Assessments Count: Using Results to Drive Supervision

In the present study, researchers were interested in the deployment and use of assessments by community corrections professionals. Researchers examined 1,087 survey responses for various measures of scoring and decision-making compliance on risk/needs assessments. The data was analyzed as a whole as well as grouped by compliance type.

The survey asked questions regarding assessment completion, risk and needs-based decision making. From the responses, researchers created compliance classes. The "substantive" class consisted of individuals who would complete assessments and use the results to make decisions in cases. "Bureaucratic" individuals completed assessment but were less likely to base decisions on them. Finally, the "cynical" compliers had relatively low levels of assessment completion and decision-making items.

According to survey results, practitioners responded that they generally complete risk/need assessments. In general, respondents self-reported that they did not always use assessment results to drive case management decisions. When researchers grouped the data, 48% of respondents were substantive compliers, 40% bureaucratic and 12% cynical. When compared to the substantive group, both the bureaucratic and cynical groups had lower levels of compliance. Of particular concern, the cynical group reported to sometimes manipulating assessments to match their per-

sonal decision-making. Interestingly, having a supervisor review completed assessments did not impact compliance group placement. Recent training was found to reduce the likelihood of bureaucratic group membership and an agency's enthusiasm regarding risk/need assessment reduced the likelihood of cynical group membership.

Practical Applications

- ✓ When unsure, use the LSI scoring manual to properly score the assessment.
- ✓ Refer to probationer's LSI results to make risk and need based decisions in case planning.
- ✓ Use assessment results to determine what specific areas should be targeted and match interventions accordingly (e.g. Carey Guides, treatment, discussions).
- ✓ Attend the Assessment and Case Planning QA/CQI training and use the tools on your own cases to determine if you are making decision based on assessed risks and needs.
- ✓ Ask your supervisor for coaching on assessment practices.
- ✓ Attend the Assessment and Case Planning 101 and 102 trainings.
- ✓ When completing reassessments, ensure that necessary information is being updated (e.g. employment, substance abuse, attitude, peers).
- ✓ As probationers change risk levels, be sure to adjust your practices accordingly.