

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Training to See Risk: Measuring the Accuracy of Clinical and Actuarial Risk Among Federal Probation Officers

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Summary/Conclusions

Researchers with the Administrative Office of the United States Courts developed a fourth generation assessment tool to determine the risk/need areas of federal probationers. Prior to training federal probation officers in the new assessment instrument, asked the officers to use their clinical judgment to determine risk. Officers were then trained and asked to determine risk using the new risk assessment tool. The researchers found that the probation officers more accurately determined the correct risk level when using the assessment.

Limitations of Information

The probation officers were studied in a large group setting, wherein all discussions of the case vignette may not have been monitored. The study did not indicate whether other probation officer characteristics were controlled for, such as experience with offenders, prior assessment utilization, or specialty training. Although the probation officers' ability to assess risk/need was explored, there was no way of knowing whether the officers would then use the results to appropriately address criminogenic needs.

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.

The Benefit of Risk Assessments

The federal court system first used a risk assessment in 1970. Following a judicial conference in 2006, the Administrative Office of the US Courts (AOC) developed a fourth-generation risk assessment instrument, the Post Conviction Risk Assessment (PCRA). The PCRA was later validated, and in 2010 and 2011, federal probation officers (PO'S) were trained to use the tool.

AOC-affiliated researchers "were interested in whether use of the PCRA would improve the ability of federal probation officers to accurately assess risk," so they designed a study to coincide with the training. Researchers conducted testing at four US locations, where PO's were gathered for training on the PCRA. At the beginning of the training, the PO's viewed a 24-minute taped interview, received collateral information, and were asked to classify the offender's risk using the following categories: Low, Low-Moderate, Moderate, and High. A total of 1,087 PO's scored the offender's risk, based on their clinical judgment. The results showed that 2% of the PO's classified the offender as Low, 30% Low-Moderate, 51% Moderate, and 17% High.

The next day, the same PO's were trained to administer the PCRA. Then, they again watched the video, reviewed the collateral information, and scored the PCRA. The results showed that 7% of the PO's assessed the offender as Low, 91% Low-Moderate, 2% Moderate, and none of the PO's assessed the offender as High risk. The correct risk level was Low-Moderate.

Overall, the study showed that unstructured clinical judgment tended to overestimate risk; however, PO's made "more accurate assessments of offender risk when using the PCRA."

Practical Applications

- ✓ Trust the results of assessments administered with fidelity, as overrides should occur in no more than 10-15% of cases.
- ✓ Supervise clients according to their individual risk and needs. Over-supervising low risk clients is expensive, diverts resources from high risk clients, and increases their likelihood of recidivism.
- ✓ Assessment results should be directly related to the goals of the case plan, focusing on criminogenic needs.
- ✓ Consider regular reviews of cases that have an override to ensure the proper supervision level is used for the duration of supervision.
- ✓ Use the results of assessments to provide feedback to clients. Highlight the most pressing criminogenic needs, as well as the strengths they might use to reduce their dynamic risk areas.
- ✓ Consider using a variety of assessment information to create a comprehensive picture of the client. Integrate the results of the ASUS, SUS, CCJMHS, MAYSI, as well as clinical evaluations from outside agencies.
- ✓ Consider re-assessment more frequently than every six months, if indicated by the client's progress or episodes of non-compliance.

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