

# The Role of Offender Risk Assessment Tools and How to Select Them

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Over the years, the assessment of offenders has evolved from using "gut feeling" to instruments that focused on past behavior (static indicators) to what are now called third generation instruments. These instruments combine static and dynamic factors to more accurately predict risk as well as to the identify the crime producing needs that should be targeted for change.

These assessment tools are valuable, but to realize their full value they must be used correctly.

## **Why is Offender Assessment Important?**

The importance of using validated and objective offender assessment tools cannot be overstated. Assessment is not only the engine that drives effective interventions with offenders, but is important for a number of other reasons. Among other things, offender assessment

- √ Helps identify the offenders most at risk for recidivating
- √ Identifies who needs the most intervention (or none at all)
- √ Identifies what crime producing needs to 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
- √ Enhances public safety

## **Types of Assessment Tools**

Assessment tools can be grouped into three basic categories: screening instruments, comprehensive risk/need assessments, and specialized tools. Before selecting one, it is important to ask a series of questions about it and how you intend to use it.

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, ROR, etc.).

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).

Specialized tools are usually used to assess specific domains (like substance abuse) or populations (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 may be in order using an instrument specifically designed for that purpose. Likewise if you are dealing with a sex offender then using an instrument specifically designed to look at risk factors related to this behavior would be in order.

In many instances you will want to consider developing 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 will 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.

In addition to questions about the nature of the assessment tool itself, there are a number of practical issues to consider:

- ✓ What do I want to use the assessment for?
- ✓ How long does it take to complete the assessment tool?
- ✓ How much training is involved?
- ✓ What is the cost?
- ✓ How complex is the tool to use and understand?
- ✓ When will the assessment be done?
- ✓ Where will the assessment be done?
- ✓ Who will do the assessment?
- ✓ What is the level of staff commitment to using the assessment tool?
- ✓ Is the assessment tool reliable (do we get consistent results)?
- ✓ Is the assessment tool valid (does it measure what we want it to measure)?

### Common Mistakes

Here are some of the more common problems with offender assessment.

Offenders are assessed, but the process ignores important factors. For example, sometimes we over-rely on static predictors, or the assessment process focuses on one or two domains (like substance abuse) to the exclusion of others.

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—some

version of "offender is a risk to reoffend unless they get substance abuse treatment". This type of information tells us little about the actual risk the offender poses to reoffend, or the level of need in specific areas.

Even when offenders are comprehensively assessed, the results are not used—everyone gets the same treatment.

Staff members often are not adequately trained in use of the instruments, or they are only trained when the new instrument is selected. Usually, 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, and new staff simply learn how to use the tools by watching the older staff. The result is that reliability and validity suffer.

### Some Points to Remember

To avoid these and other mistakes and to derive the full value from assessments, it is important to remember a number of things.

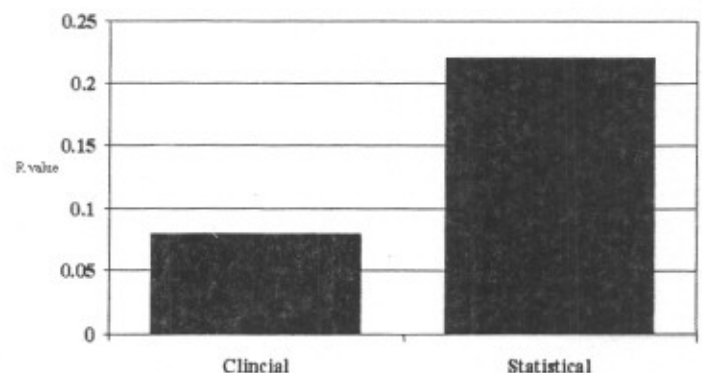
First, there is no "one size fits all" assessment tool. Some domains or types of offenders will require specialized assessments, such as sex offenders or mentally disturbed individuals. In addition, the use or purpose will vary. For example, the assessment tool for making a decision about whether to grant pretrial release may be different from one for making a decision about whether to grant probation.

Second, we have known for over 50 years that actuarial assessment is more accurate than clinical assessment. **Figure 1** (below) shows the predictive validity of clinical instruments versus actuarial assessments. But remember, no process is perfect and there will always be false positives and false negatives—sometimes low risk offenders reoffend, and sometimes high risk offenders succeed.

Third, 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

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**Figure 1**  
Comparison of Clinical vs. Statistical Prediction of Recidivism



Source: Goggin, C. E. (1994). Clinical versus Actuarial Prediction: A Meta Analysis. Unpublished manuscript. University of New Brunswick, Saint John, New Brunswick.

important to consider assessment as an ongoing process.

Fourth, assessments help guide decisions, but they do not make them—professional discretion is part of good assessment-aided decision-making.

Finally, while the new dynamic assessment tools can produce more useful information, they require more effort to insure reliability—they require staff training and continual monitoring of the assessment process. Like just about everything we do, fidelity and quality assurance make 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.



### Tips for Maximizing the Assessment Process

- View assessment as an ongoing process not simply an event
- Develop a flexible process that expands as needed—higher risk offenders need more assessment
- Standardize the process and tool so that everyone is speaking the same language
- Make sure the assessment is accurate and correct errors
- Make sure staff correctly interpret the results
- Use the assessment results to develop case supervision and treatment plans
- Use assessment results to assign offenders to programs/groups
- Share information with service providers
- Reassess offenders periodically
- Audit assessments on a regular basis
- Train and retrain staff
- Periodically validate the tool with your population