

Ten Things Risk/Needs Assessment Is Not¹

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COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS PROVIDES a host of essential services to the courts, communities, and individuals. The growing emphasis on reducing recidivism has led many agencies to infuse Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) principles² into their practices, including the adoption of standardized risk/needs assessment instruments (Taxman, 2018). The developers of the RNR

model (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Andrews et al., 1990, 2006; Bonta & Andrews, 2017) emphasized reliable and valid assessment as the cornerstone of effective supervision and case management. Instruments such as the Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (Andrews et al., 2004), Ohio Risk Assessment System (Latessa et al., 2011), Post-Conviction Risk Assessment (Lowenkamp et al., 2013), and many others are designed to identify justice-involved clients (JICs)³ who are most likely to reoffend and the influences that contribute to that risk. By knowing who and what to focus on, probation officers (POs) can achieve the best possible results with their caseloads by working to alter JICs' criminal trajectories and ultimately improving community safety.

Because the benefits to JICs and the public are so clear, the value of good risk/needs

assessment seems self-evident. In actual practice, however, something seems to get lost. Too often, the inclusion of risk/needs assessment has not sufficiently transformed supervision work. Despite the best efforts of all involved, the promised reductions in offending remain elusive. However, decades of research show that—if adhered to—the RNR principles are sound and that improved supervision outcomes are achievable (Bonta et al., 2021; Wormith & Bonta, 2018).

Collectively, the authors of this article have over 100 years of experience working with JICs, training and supervising probation and parole officers, and designing and implementing effective correctional practices. Our own grasp of the RNR model has evolved along the way. So has our understanding of how to improve real-world implementation. The lessons learned have been hard-won. We owe a debt of gratitude to the agencies, managers, and officers we have worked with, as we have learned a great deal from them. We have also been inspired by their dedication to an essential and challenging profession. In our view, the path forward begins with identifying some

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² RNR principles include directing services to higher risk cases, criminogenic needs become the focus of supervision and community referrals, and CBT methods are used and tailored to clients.

³ Many labels are used to describe people receiving services in community corrections (e.g., probationer, parolee, offender, juvenile delinquent, justice-involved person, etc.). Throughout this article we use the term *justice-involved client* and in the interest of brevity the abbreviation *JIC*.

of the most common misconceptions about post-conviction risk/needs assessment.⁴

Despite knowing what *should* be done, implementing risk/needs assessment in practice is not straightforward. A set of challenges exist for officers who must conduct assessments with clients who are mandated to be there, while a different set of challenges present themselves to administrators who must determine how best to train officers and use the data provided by assessment instruments to manage cases. Navigating these challenges can result in gaps between theory (what we *should* do) and practice (what we *are* doing or what we realistically *can* do).

In this paper, we first note five misconceptions that we have often observed among officers conducting assessments and offer suggestions for making the assessment process one that yields valid information relevant for supervision and case management. We then proceed to note five issues of likely concern to administrators who must oversee the agency's implementation and training of risk/needs assessment. See if you agree with our top *ten things risk/needs assessment is not*.

1. Risk/needs assessment is not based on one source of information

Leading risk/needs instruments are centered around a one-on-one interview between officer and client. This emphasis on self-report information from JICs has led agencies and POs at times to misinterpret the assessment process as *solely* based on client self-report. At one extreme, POs may conclude that information that conflicts with a JIC's self-report is to be disregarded because scoring the instrument is to be based *only* on self-report. At the other extreme, officers may assume that assessment is not to be trusted because JIC self-report is itself untrustworthy and unreliable. Either extreme is likely to lead POs to question the results and treat the assessment process as a box-checking activity rather than an essential part of case management. While the JICs' self-report is the heart of a criminal risk/needs assessment, the interview should not be the sole source of information for scoring

the assessment, and self-report from the JIC should neither trump additional sources of information nor be dismissed out of hand as unreliable.

We *recommend* viewing client self-report as but *one* important stream of information from which to score the risk/needs instrument and inform decision-making about a case. In fact, valid assessment *requires* corroborating information from sources such as official records, as well as interviews with collateral contacts such as a JIC's intimate partner, family members, teachers, work supervisors, treatment providers, and so forth. POs will more accurately score items on risk/needs assessment instruments and generate case plans that are more targeted and practical when they consider all the best available—and not just the most readily available—information. When a JIC's description of their functioning in a criminal risk domain⁵ is vague, or otherwise appears unreliable, additional sources of information should be solicited so that POs do not rely on hunches when scoring and case planning in that risk area.

When information from collateral sources conflicts with JIC self-report, risk/needs assessments rely on POs using good judgment on the credibility of that information and the extent to which it should be integrated into scoring the assessment instrument and formulating their case management plans. For example, if a PO is conducting the portion of an assessment interview focused on education, and their adolescent client reports that "school is going well," and "I don't get into trouble at school," but based on principal and teachers' reports, the PO knows that the youth is failing most classes and is repeatedly suspended, the collateral information should inform scoring and case management and not be disregarded simply because it contradicts self-report.

PO judgment is also important in evaluating the risk information that JICs may not perceive as relevant to their lifestyles. For example, a JIC may genuinely perceive a friend as a positive influence and therefore describe the person as such. Yet, the description of that friendship may indicate this

friend supplies the JIC with illegal substances, encourages their use, and "has my back" when the JIC gets into trouble. In this example, the accuracy and usefulness of the resulting risk/needs assessment will rely on the PO's judgment and knowledge of RNR principles to note the companion as a potential risk rather than a positive influence.

While it is inevitable that some JICs will attempt to deceive POs, research suggests that such concerns are overstated; client self-report is largely consistent with criminal information in official records (Daylor et al., 2019; Pollock et al., 2016) and predictive of both general and violent reoffending (Mills et al., 2003). The fact that some clients will distort information to present themselves in a more favorable light, coupled with the possibility that clients can occasionally misperceive their life circumstances, reinforces the need for assessments to be based on multiple sources of information. These realities simply underscore the necessity for assessments to be conducted by POs who are skilled in interviewing and critically evaluating multiple streams of information.

2. Risk/needs assessment is not a conversation about change

Effective probation work is complicated, and POs need to possess a multifaceted knowledge base (e.g., understanding legal concepts, administrative mandates and procedures, RNR principles, and the suitability of local treatment resources). Officers must also be proficient in engaging clients, influencing behavior change, and promoting accountability. To that end, motivational interviewing (MI) skills can be valuable in supervision, and MI has established itself as a communication style that is commonly integrated into community corrections (Stinson & Clark, 2017; Tafrate et al., 2019).

MI skills assist POs in establishing rapport and guiding conversations in productive directions. MI skills also allow POs to explore and heighten JICs' awareness of the connections between lifestyle choices and subsequent losses (e.g., damaged relationships, ruined career paths, financial problems, and incarcerations), fostering motivation around changing activities in risk-relevant life areas.

Similarly, the integration of cognitive behavioral techniques (CBT) into community corrections has shown promising reductions in recidivism and contributed to several probation-oriented CBT curriculums (see STICS, Bonta et al., 2021; EPICS, Smith et al., 2012; STARR, Lowenkamp et al., 2014; Forensic

⁴ These guidelines pertain to the use of post-conviction risk and needs assessment instruments to inform decisions and case planning that occur after case disposition; specifically, after conviction and sentencing. They may also be applied to the application of assessment results to inform decision-making and case planning in the context of alternative forms of criminal justice processing.

⁵ Although criminal risk/needs are commonly referred to as risk factors, we prefer terms such as *criminal risk domains*, *criminogenic life areas*, or *risk-relevant life areas*. The term risk factor implies a single characteristic about a person that is linked with a negative outcome (e.g., high cholesterol is a risk factor for heart disease), whereas the attributes assessed on risk/needs instruments usually encompass a JIC's functioning in broad life areas.

CBT, Tafra et al., 2018). CBT emphasizes conversations that POs can use to help JICs alter problematic thinking and behavior patterns relevant to reoffending.

POs trained in the use of MI and/or CBT might try to overuse these skills during an assessment interview, adopting a “fix as you go” approach that can unnecessarily lengthen and complicate the assessment interview. Well-meaning POs can drift into two common activities: (1) attempting to enhance a JIC’s motivation to make changes in criminogenic life areas uncovered during the assessment and (2) prematurely applying active interventions such as recommending behavioral “action steps” to a JIC to alter risky behavior.

Consider this scenario: An officer wants to score an assessment item that measures a JIC’s attitude towards offending. Referring to a conviction for stealing a car, the JIC states, “The owner parked it next to the store. It was dark. They left it running with the keys in it. Someone was going to take it, it just happened to be me.” The PO immediately reflects, “Your view is you had a right to take the car.” The client pauses, then adds, “It’s not like that... I wasn’t thinking... I knew it was wrong but it just kind of happened and now I’m paying for it. I can’t keep doing stupid stuff like that. I tell myself, ‘Keep your hands off other people’s stuff.’” For some insightful and highly skilled POs, it can then be quite natural to automatically “pursue and reinforce” the JIC’s Change Talk (i.e., verbalizations in favor of change). There may also be temptations to transition into “fix-it” mode and make suggestions (e.g., “It seems like you need to stay off of Lyndon Street at night”), recommend intervention referrals (e.g., “You would benefit from some cognitive skills classes”), or challenge criminogenic thinking (e.g., “How does not caring about others sometimes backfire on you?”). However, doing all this while conducting an assessment interview can make the process cumbersome and unfocused.

We recommend that the assessment interview be thought of as an exploration of the JIC’s life—a baseline measure of risk and need—that sets the stage for subsequent motivational and change-oriented conversations. Certainly, MI skills can be used sparingly to engage JICs and navigate and achieve more depth during the assessment interview. However, adopting a pure MI style during the risk/needs assessment (e.g., having JICs take the lead about what is most important, exploring change goals, and POs strategically evoking change talk) is likely to complicate

or even derail the process. Risk/needs assessment is not about enhancing motivation, evoking change talk, or building client skills for changing thinking and behavior. These types of change methodologies should not be integrated into the assessment interview and are best done “downstream” after the instrument is scored and the PO understands *all* the factors that can lead to re-offending. With this information at hand, the PO will be able to identify the most critical criminogenic life areas to work on with a particular client.

Conducting a quality risk/needs assessment does not mean doing skillful supervision or case management. Likewise, being skilled at promoting behavior change does not automatically translate to good assessment. One does not guarantee the other. It is important to distinguish risk/needs assessment from change-oriented endeavors.

3. Risk/needs assessment is not an inquiry about mental health problems

Major mental disorders are common in justice-involved populations (both in prisons and probation/parole), with prevalence rates exceeding those found in non-justice community samples (Brooker et al., 2012; Steadman et al., 2009). In terms of managing JICs on supervision, there is an intuitive appeal in the idea that criminal behavior is a byproduct of psychological distress and that alleviating symptoms will reduce reoffending. In fact, the scientific literature suggests otherwise; mental health symptoms are rarely the main drivers of criminal or violent offending, and focusing on mental health symptoms alone is unlikely to have a significant impact on future criminality (Bolaños et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2012; Peterson et al., 2014; Skeem et al., 2015).

Screening for mental health problems should be part of the assessment, but not the primary focus of a risk/needs assessment. The interplay between mental health and criminal risk is complex. Mental health difficulties will often contribute to, exacerbate, and even be the “on-ramp” to problems in criminogenic life areas. For example, symptoms related to schizophrenic spectrum difficulties, depression and anxiety, or traumatic experiences can lead to changes in relationships, routines, and habits (e.g., withdrawal from work/school, seeking out substances to self-medicate, increasing the influence of negative peers). In such cases, a common mistake is to assume that, by itself, addressing symptoms will automatically impact entrenched patterns

now driving criminal behavior. Making the shift away from a focus on symptoms of psychological distress to JICs’ functioning in major criminogenic life areas can be difficult for some POs.⁶ After all, messages from the media, the public, and some policymakers often attribute criminal conduct to mental illness, and the symptoms of emotional and psychological disturbance can sometimes be obvious during PO-client interactions. For many POs there is the natural desire to want to fully explore (and alleviate) psychological distress and help JICs feel better. While this goal may be worthwhile, nothing is likely to make JICs’ mental health problems worse than getting incarcerated or re-incarcerated. The reality is that if POs’ hearts are in the right place, then understanding those influences that put JICs at greatest risk for rearrest must be the top priority.

At the other extreme, it can be a mistake to assume that mental health symptoms are unimportant and should not be identified or addressed. There are certainly some individual cases, albeit the exception to the rule, in which a JIC’s mental health symptoms relate directly to the offending behavior. In addition, addressing mental health problems is sometimes necessary to help JICs focus, attend, and participate fully in interventions that target criminogenic life areas. When mental health symptoms are particularly severe, alleviating psychological distress is important so that JICs can be less distracted and more open to working on the risk-relevant areas of their lives (e.g., maintaining employment, improving family relationships, avoiding contact with criminal peers). In this sense, mental health symptoms can be viewed as *responsivity factors* that can interfere with working on larger life areas (Bonta & Andrews, 2017).

We recommend POs prioritize the identification and exploration of criminogenic life areas rather than symptoms of psychological distress. Screening for and making referrals for mental health problems is an important adjunct to, but not a replacement for, identifying and addressing the criminogenic domains of a JIC’s life.

Given that many JICs will have mental health problems, it is not uncommon for items

⁶ Other practitioners such as case managers also struggle with this issue. Several of us are clinical psychologists and for years our main way of approaching cases centered on a symptom-based approach. When we began working with JICs, it took a long time to make the transition from a *symptom-based* to a *risk-based* mindset.

related to depression, anxiety, trauma, and serious mental illness to appear on risk/needs assessments. The purpose of these items is to screen for clients with mental health needs to make potential referrals. Practically, POs will have to recognize and screen for mental health disorders, locate community resources, and make appropriate treatment referrals when necessary. Additionally, understanding how symptoms may be influencing behavior in risk-relevant life areas is important for case planning purposes and can inform decisions about recommending some form of mental health treatment. However, POs should not be expected to drift too far into the roles of psychologists, social workers, or therapists. Being able to screen for mental health problems and understand how such symptoms are influencing supervision is enough for officers to tackle.

4. Risk/needs assessment is not pessimistic (or “negative labelling”)

Let’s face it—much of what occurs in criminal justice settings is negative. JICs sometimes commit crimes that challenge our sense of right and wrong in the world and violate the safety of people in their communities. They also might resist supervision and intervention that is mandated to them by the courts. Moreover, to many, risk models seem negatively keyed.

It can be common for POs and case managers to be reluctant to embrace a *risk reduction* perspective with JICs because it is viewed as intrinsically pessimistic and deficit-driven. Working from a risk framework may seem like emphasizing client failures and problems, and the assessment process simply a matter of adding up the number of risk factors a client has amassed. We have heard POs describe scoring a risk/needs assessment item as “dinging” a JIC. In this view, endorsing an item is perceived as a moral judgment against the client and a potential punishment.

The reality is that risk-based models, when used effectively, offer a constructive perspective on client functioning. A risk/needs assessment is more than just a checklist of JICs’ shortcomings. A shift towards a different, more multifaceted way of thinking about risk/needs is often required to make these models useful. *We recommend* that officers frame risk/needs assessment as a more optimistic endeavor than it appears on the surface. RNR principles actually provide an *optimistic* view of JIC functioning because the criminogenic life areas measured are largely changeable.

Most risk areas have dynamic components (the one exception being criminal history). Therefore, JICs’ future criminality can be prevented if supervision assesses and addresses their functioning within the unique constellation of risk domains relevant to their lives.

It is also important to appreciate the interrelationships between criminal risk domains and the unique ways these may manifest across individuals. Given the multidetermined nature of human behavior, risk domains are often connected in ways that can be complex in how they amplify or reduce each other (Mitchell et al., 2018). For example, consider a JIC who spends the better part of his considerable free time with friends who drink heavily, smoke pot, and steal cars. His friends reinforce his unproductive beliefs about pursuing school or meaningful employment, and his cannabis use worsens his school performance or potential marketability as an employee. His friends also reinforce his excitement-seeking attitudes, his sense that he doesn’t fit in with conventional school or work activities, and encourage increasing levels of impulsive behavior. Thus, the various criminogenic life areas relevant to forensic cases often influence each other in an interrelated and destructive manner. Due to such synergistic effects, the influence of risk domains can be multiplicative rather than simply additive. On the optimistic side, because risk domains are interconnected, a positive change in one of these life domains can facilitate positive changes in others. A strategic focus on one or two criminogenic life areas can often create a positive ripple effect in a JIC’s life.

Framing risk/needs assessment as a thoughtful, strategic, and optimistic endeavor—requiring officer curiosity and expertise—prevents assessment from becoming an unchangeable, pessimistic, or condemning conclusion about a JIC. Having an in-depth understanding of JICs’ functioning in these important life areas, rather than a list of factors to be hastily checked off a list, is at the heart of a practical, solution-focused, and individually tailored supervision strategy.

5. Risk/needs assessment is not an unstructured search for strengths

Consideration of JICs’ strengths—although sometimes factored into program delivery to establish rapport with clients and improve the effectiveness of intervention—is typically not built into risk/needs assessments. In our experience, the way POs typically use strengths in

case planning, if at all, is to leverage them to increase a JIC’s interest in a particular intervention or activity (e.g., flex funds might be used to have a JIC attend music lessons at a community center or join a YMCA sports league). In other words, strengths are not commonly measured and incorporated into the calculation of a JIC’s risk to reoffend.

Although criminal justice assessments tend to focus exclusively on empirically established risks and needs, some JICs—even those with high scores across multiple risk domains—manage to overcome these issues and ultimately become law-abiding or even thriving members of society. This leads us to borrow from the literature on *resilience* that originates from other fields, in which strengths-based factors serve to protect otherwise high-risk individuals against the onset or development of negative outcomes (Farrington, 2003; Masten, 2016; Seligman, 2002). Similarly, research on criminal desistance supports the identification of strengths that are associated with a JIC’s transition out of crime (Burnett & McNeill, 2005; Maruna, 2001; Serin & Lloyd, 2009; 2017). This body of research recognizes that strengths can be present in the form of external circumstances (e.g., prosocial bonds with friends, family, or mentors), personal qualities (e.g., academic ability), or internal processes (e.g., optimism regarding one’s ability to lead a prosocial life).

However, the research on strengths and their application in practice lags far behind research on criminal risk domains. There remains confusion and a lack of consensus on how to refer to, define, measure, and use information about strengths. It is important to note that a strength is not simply the opposite of, or absence of, a risk. Strengths that have value in the assessment process are those that (1) have a negative association with criminal conduct (a promotive factor), and/or (2) exert a buffering effect on overall risk level—typically in a higher risk group (a protective factor) (Wanamaker et al., 2018). In fact, strengths can exist concurrently with risk domains and can account for differences in criminal outcomes in JICs with otherwise comparable risk profiles. For example, consider two JICs who have the same number of close antisocial peers. One of the JICs also has several close prosocial peers, while the other does not. It is easy to see how the difference in these two cases can influence their supervision outcomes. To that point, there is preliminary yet compelling evidence that including strengths information—in a

structured way using validated assessment instruments—improves the prediction of recidivism *over and above* risk domains alone (Brown et al., 2020; Burghart et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2015; 2016).

Although more research around strengths is needed, what we do know is that, just as not all deficits are criminogenic in nature, not all strengths contribute to lowering risk of recidivism (e.g., “JIC has a nice smile,” “...is a smooth talker,” “...is street smart.”). There are several validated instruments with integrated strengths domains, as well as several structured, validated strengths-based instruments tailored to JICs designed to supplement risk/needs assessment (Wanamaker et al., 2018).⁷

We recommend that officers (and agencies) interested in integrating strengths into assessments adopt a validated instrument and avoid relying on intuition or unstructured judgment. Caution is warranted against adding strengths to the assessment process in an unguided, unsystematic way, without proper training. The haphazard integration of strengths into an assessment can lead to potential errors in estimating a JIC’s risk to reoffend and ultimately to inappropriate classification decisions.

Despite recent research demonstrating the incremental value of strengths in the prediction of recidivism, the practical application of strengths in case planning is still emerging. *We recommend* that officers (and agencies), interested in integrating strengths into case planning look to balance both traditional *avoidance* goals with *approach* goals (Tafate et al., 2018). In this balanced strategy, case planning does not solely rely on JICs avoiding criminal peers or places where illegal substances might be available. Rather, approach goals assist JICs in pursuing valued life directions in ways that combat the riskiest aspects of their lives. Examples include having success in school or work, acquiring and spending time with prosocial friends, and developing more positive family or intimate relationships. The two approaches (reducing risk and enhancing strengths) can be complementary and applied concurrently. As a final caution, although the inclusion of strengths adds value to assessment and case planning, a focus on

strengths should not be in lieu of activities that focus on risk reduction.

6. Risk/needs assessment is not a box-checking exercise

Jurisdictions are increasingly pressured into incorporating risk/needs assessment into their workflow, and such initiatives have been *rolled out* across the country. In some agency cultures, “rolling it out” can devolve into a process of checking boxes and recording information in the case notes, with little appreciation of how to use the assessment to guide supervision, referral, and intervention practices. In its most extreme version, the culture around risk/needs assessment is swathed in a veneer of dismissive resentment. The implication is that assessment is merely a “data collection” mechanism for the “bean counters” that is burdensome and distracting to those tasked with doing the “real work” of community supervision.⁸ In a similar but less emotionally charged culture, the view is that “policy” requires assessments to be completed, and this task is primarily approached as a bureaucratic duty. In our experience, a box-checking culture is problematic as it degrades the quality of assessments and the degree to which the results guide supervision practices. The culture surrounding risk/needs assessment impacts how it gets “rolled out,” administered, and used.

In a box-checking culture, risk/needs assessment is often trained in a void, with little time devoted to case planning concerns such as discussing the complexity of how individual risk domains play out in the real-world lives of JICs. Training POs to use assessment instruments before they are educated about the nature of criminogenic life areas is a cart-before-the-horse situation. Knowledge of the various ways risk domains present themselves in JICs’ lives, and how those domains influence each other (as noted earlier), is foundational for conducting effective case management. Administrators may optimistically assume that effective case planning skills will automatically emerge by training POs in scoring risk/needs assessment instruments; but that rarely happens in a box-checking culture.

The following are some hallmarks of box-checking cultural practices: (1) conducting assessments in settings that lack privacy;

(2) making few, or no, attempts to reduce noise and office distractions (e.g., phone calls, intercom announcements, interruptions by colleagues); (3) entering client information into the data management system during the interview, resulting in the PO paying more attention to the computer screen than the client; and (4) over-emphasizing timely completion and electronic filing of results, resulting in pressure on POs to cut corners to avoid criticism or discipline. These types of cultural practices surrounding the administration of risk/needs assessment can make the process feel more like an assembly line than an in-depth, thoughtful human service interaction, can reduce JICs’ willingness to disclose sensitive personal information, and inadvertently create a culture that emphasizes the quantity and timeliness of assessments over their quality.

In terms of utilization, the results of risk/needs assessments will occupy a minor role in guiding supervision practices in a box-checking culture. Instead, probation staff will emphasize compliance with conditions over improvements in risk-relevant life areas during supervision. This focus creates an additional problem, because greater emphasis on conditions than on criminogenic risk has been associated with greater recidivism (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Further, an excessive focus by POs on supervision conditions may tend to underestimate sources of risk in clients’ lifestyles (e.g., “I’ve supervised this guy lots of times before. He’s not a knucklehead—he shows up, he does his programs. Why do I even need to know who he hangs out with when he leaves my office?”).

We recommend that agencies work to create an office culture that supports quality risk/needs assessments and the principles of RNR. Office culture can be thought of as the values, assumptions, tacit agreements, understandings, and ways of thinking and behaving that are shared by the members of an office and that are taught to new members. Because supervisors play an integral role in setting the cultural tone, agencies can improve the culture around assessment by hiring, promoting, and developing supervisors with a strong understanding and buy-in of RNR concepts. One of the most important, yet unappreciated, responsibilities of a supervisor is managing the office culture. A culture around assessment will develop whether a supervisor makes an effort to influence it or not. If not established around RNR principles, a box-checking culture is likely to fill that void.

⁷ Examples include but are not limited to the Service Planning Instrument (SPIn; Wanamaker, 2003); the Inventory of Offender Risk, Needs, and Strengths (IORNS; Miller, 2006); and the Structured Assessment of Protective Factors for Violence Risk (SAPROF; de Vogel et al., 2009). For further information about these and other instruments that measure strengths, please consult Wanamaker et al. (2018).

⁸ For the record, this perspective is not so different from that once held by one of the authors of this paper who was a probation officer and later became a probation supervisor.

POs will excel in skills that supervisors actively reinforce. Behaviors and skills not supported or modeled are less likely to be used by officers in daily interactions. Supervisors should be encouraged to discuss cases with POs by using risk/needs assessment results as a starting point in case reviews (e.g., begin case reviews with an overview of the relevant risk domains).

Supervisors can also emphasize case planning that targets changes in risk-relevant areas over superficial compliance with conditions. Finally, supervisors can monitor and reward both the quality *and* timeliness of assessments. Supervisors do not need to be experts at administering the instruments themselves; rather, they need to know good work when they see and hear it, be able to provide accurate feedback on areas in an assessment interview that were overlooked, and connect the dots between assessment, case planning, and subsequent supervision contacts. Will POs still have to check boxes when they conduct assessments? Of course. But in strong office cultures, they no longer disparage the process as *just* a box-checking exercise.

7. Risk/needs assessment is not implemented through a “drive-by” training

While the constraints of budgets, staffing, and time favor “one and done” training events, proficiency in risk/needs assessment is not achieved through a single training workshop. Such an approach paves the way for poor implementation of evidence-based practices. In turn, poor implementation of an instrument can lead to its being disregarded in supervision, and equally troubling, to inaccurate assessment results that do not aid in predicting risk or identifying needs (Vincent et al., 2016). All these outcomes undermine the ultimate purpose of implementing risk/needs assessment in the first place.

Alexander (2011) noted that effectively implementing evidence-based interventions in community corrections requires attending to fidelity (i.e., making sure the intervention is delivered as intended), devoting sufficient organizational resources to thoroughly train the staff who will be delivering the intervention, and providing follow-up coaching so that staff become proficient and sustain their proficiency over time. These overarching points about fidelity, proficiency, and sustainability are relevant to the implementation of risk/needs assessment.

With respect to fidelity in risk/needs

assessment, *we recommend* POs receive education in the nature of RNR principles *before* they are trained in the intricacies of administering and scoring the instrument itself. Risk/needs assessment instruments are designed to quantify elements of JICs’ functioning in broad-life areas linked with reoffending. However, for risk/needs assessment to meaningfully inform supervision and case management, officers must understand qualitatively how a JIC’s life functioning in any given area is linked to that individual’s offending behavior. For example, knowing that a client is unemployed is useful for predicting the likelihood of reoffending. However, understanding the nature of the client’s employment problems from skills—to attitude—to history is going to drive case management decisions and the focus of supervision conversations. Training POs to administer a risk/needs instrument without first establishing a foundational understanding of the nature of criminogenic life areas is akin to medical students learning to administer physical exams without first understanding anatomy and physiology. A strong grounding in RNR principles sets the stage for effective case planning and supervision strategy.

With respect to proficiency and sustainability, *we recommend* equipping POs with communication skills (such as motivational interviewing; with the caveat noted in item #2) that enable them to develop rapport, encourage greater client disclosure of relevant information, and guide the pace and structure of the assessment interview. It is unrealistic to assume that communication skills will be acquired and implemented in a single training. Indeed, research indicates that follow-up or refresher training is needed for sustained, effective application of these skills (Alexander et al., 2013; Lowenkamp et al., 2012).

Having POs record their assessments and receive feedback and coaching helps them improve their performance and become proficient (Ferguson, 2002). POs often find reviewing office visit recordings intimidating at first, but later view the process as essential to improving their skills and using them routinely (Alexander et al., 2013). Recent national guidelines for risk/needs assessment recommend that POs complete a minimum of three practice cases and have them reviewed to help ensure inter-rater reliability (Desmarais et al., 2022). After POs have achieved a degree of proficiency in administering an assessment instrument, routine quality assurance or follow-up with a coach can help with reliability and prevent the development of idiosyncratic

scoring errors and other signs of “drift” that lead to unreliability over time. Implementing and sustaining risk/needs assessment often means developing agency capacity to provide coaching and constructive feedback on recorded work samples.

8. Risk/needs assessment is not intrinsically biased against BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color)

There is a long-standing problem of systemic injustices experienced by certain racial/ethnic groups. That Black individuals are arrested and convicted for crime at a rate considerably higher than Whites, for example, is indisputable (e.g., Abrams et al., 2021; Hockenberry & Puzzanchera, 2020; Kim & Kiesel, 2018; Schleiden et al., 2020). At this point, most justice administrators have likely heard the recent sentiments that risk/needs assessments produce racist algorithms that merely exacerbate these long-standing racial disparities in the justice system.

The fact is, a primary intention of the development of risk/needs assessment instruments was to promote objective and accurate case management decisions, thereby reducing racial and ethnic disparities. Identifying factors known to be predictive of a negative outcome and using those factors to guide decisions *reduces* subjective and biased decision-making that is otherwise based on hunches (Vincent & Viljoen, 2020).

There is increasing evidence that when courts *do not follow* valid risk/needs assessment results provided by their probation offices, their decisions lead to racial disparities among incarcerated JICs, whereas reliance on risk/needs instruments would have eliminated those disparities (Lehmann et al., 2020; Marlowe et al., 2020). Moreover, there is evidence that use of a valid risk/needs assessment instrument before sentencing may significantly reduce racial disparities in diversion decisions (Onifade et al., 2019). Currently, there is no evidence from credible studies that use of risk/needs assessment has a disparate impact on BIPOC (Viljoen et al., 2019). In other words, there is no evidence that once a risk/needs assessment instrument is adopted for diversion, incarceration, or other such decisions, it increases rates of incarceration or other negative outcomes for BIPOC relative to their White counterparts. Indeed, to date, quite the opposite appears to be true.

Currently, racial bias has been detected in very few risk/needs assessment instruments

to date⁹ and sometimes falls in the direction of working against White defendants as opposed to against BIPOC defendants (Vincent & Viljoen, 2020). If an instrument were racially biased, it would mean the instrument functioned differently for one racial/ethnic group than for another racial/ethnic group (see joint statement from the American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education, 2014). For example, one way in which a risk/needs instrument would be racially biased is if BIPOC individuals scored higher on the instrument, on average, than their White counterparts and yet were *not* more likely to recidivate than their White counterparts. Scores need to mean the same thing for different groups of individuals.

We—and recent national guidelines (Desmarais et al., 2022)—*recommend* that justice agencies make sure the assessment instrument they are using is tested statistically to determine whether it contains racial bias. Moreover, *we recommend* that justice agencies favor the use of instruments with items that consider a combination of JICs' actual self-reported violent and illegal behaviors and official criminal records as opposed to items based entirely on counts of events from official records, such as number of prior felonies or prior probation violations (Miller et al., 2021; Skeem & Lowenkamp, 2020; Vincent & Viljoen, 2020). We already know BIPOC individuals are significantly more likely to be apprehended than White individuals. The racial disparities in official records are far greater than the disparities in self-reported offending and violence between these groups (Loeber et al., 2015). In other words, official records can contain disparities that do not equate to JICs' *actual behavior*, making the "inputs" to the risk instrument potentially biased. In addition to the problem with the inputs, a highly sensitive risk instrument designed to predict recidivism in a particular jurisdiction where BIPOC individuals are more likely to be arrested is going to produce higher scores for BIPOC individuals because it is doing its job: predicting who will be rearrested (Skeem & Lowenkamp, 2020). In effect, in these situations, the risk instrument would not be the problem. Instead, it would be shining a light on long-standing systemic issues (Vincent & Viljoen, 2020).

After justice agencies test the risk/needs instrument to ensure it is free of racial bias, *we recommend* that they be sure to make their staff and court partners aware of the validity of their risk/needs assessment instrument for use with BIPOC. This will promote acceptance of the instrument in decision-making, which, as noted, may be essential for reducing disparities.

Finally, algorithms or structured decisions are transparent, objective, adjustable, and easily regulated. Unstructured human decision-making is not (Mullainathan, 2019). The psychology literature on implicit bias suggests that people can discriminate without intentional awareness (Gran-Ruaz et al., 2022; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). For example, let's assume racial disparities appear to be emerging in a particular probation office where unstructured decision-making is the norm for assigning risk levels to JICs. If you were to ask POs in this office what is leading to the problem, you would get different answers (and probably defensiveness). Attempts at identifying the underlying mechanism(s) driving the disparate decisions would be unsuccessful due to the idiosyncratic nature of individual officers' attitudes, and because people often cannot explain the reasoning behind their hunches. In addition, rectifying biased decision-making in this type of scenario is complicated—usually attempted through training endeavors to combat prejudicial attitudes (Kim & Roberson, 2022; Paluck et al., 2021). On the other hand, for a validated risk/needs assessment instrument, if a problem is identified, it is rather straightforward to adjust the decision-making algorithm. An algorithmic approach makes it much easier for agencies to detect and fix problems. Removal of risk/needs instruments simply means going back to the opaque human decision-making processes that led to the grave injustices in the first place.

9. Risk/needs assessment is not to be overridden lightly

Sometimes, criteria other than risk/needs assessment scores will guide supervision practices. Professional overrides occur when formal assessment is completed and the assessed risk level of a JIC is then changed. The resulting decision-making, supervision activities, and services provided are then made congruent with the new overridden risk level, rather than the originally assessed risk level. Overrides generally occur at two different points: (1) when the PO conducting the assessment decides to override the results,

and (2) when the agency's policies dictate that a specific group of JICs are mandated to pre-determined risk/supervision levels.

At the officer stage, unofficial or outside information that is *not incorporated* into the risk/needs assessment may be used to justify changing the assessed risk level of a JIC. In these cases, the primary intent of the override is to provide a more accurate assessment of risk, and by extension, more appropriate levels of service and supervision.

At the organizational stage, policies or mandates may direct POs to automatically change a JIC's assessed risk level based on a pre-determined criterion. This is most often found in policies regarding JICs convicted of sexual, domestic violence, or other serious violent offenses. In almost every case, policies override the assessed risk into higher or even the highest risk level. One of the primary intents is to ensure that these JICs are intensely supervised in the community to protect the agency from controversy should there be a re-offense (i.e., "CYA").

Research has examined whether professional overrides increase or decrease the predictive accuracy of risk/needs assessment instruments. Testing the impact of professional overrides has clearly shown that the predictive accuracy of risk/needs instruments deteriorates when there is an override of the assessed level of risk. This decline occurs irrespective of the override being the decision of individual POs or organizational policy (Cohen et al., 2020; Wormith & Bonta, 2021). Unfortunately, the use of overrides has increased over the years (Wormith & Bonta, 2021).

Although there are times when overriding the assessed risk level makes sense, the impact of overrides can have serious and significant detrimental effects to an organization and the supervision of JICs. Experience over the past 20-plus years shows that resources for community supervision agencies are stretched and limited. The override of assessed risk levels results in a higher proportion of cases supervised as high-risk, placing greater demands on staff and resources. JICs end up being supervised more closely than their assessment indicates they should be, and such cases occupy services and officer time that could otherwise be spent on JICs that are truly high risk. This practice can also be of harm to lower risk clients who end up becoming more entrenched in the system (e.g., more conditions interfering with employment; increased contact with higher risk JICs).

⁹ Racial bias may be more common in pretrial risk tools (Desmarais et al., 2021).

Another unforeseen consequence of routine overrides is their impact on POs' perception of the value of the risk/needs assessment process itself (e.g., "What is the point of conducting a quality assessment when policy, not the assessment results, will direct my day-to-day supervision of the case?"). If JICs are all fated to receive the same level of supervision, then officers will attach little value to the process (e.g., "Sex offenders go to S.O. supervision, DV guys go to D.V. treatment—what's the difference how they score?"). High levels of policy-directed overrides facilitate mistrust of the usefulness of assessment in general. The agency's culture will tend to breed a dismissiveness of risk/needs assessment and RNR principles, tainting the work of well-trained officers and hindering efforts to implement these and other evidence-based practices.

We recommend that agencies track and approve PO-initiated overrides and the rationale behind them. The expectation would be that overrides should occur in less than 10 percent of cases (ideally less than 5 percent), and should be distributed across all risk levels, offense types, and other representative demographics. This will ensure that no inherent biases (e.g., cultural, racial, offense-driven, etc.) are fueling overrides. Tracking the rationales for overrides permits POs and supervisors to discuss the accuracy of scoring, reasoning behind decisions, how overrides affect the probability of reoffending (i.e., risk principle), and, if the override results in a higher risk classification, how this will be addressed in supervision. In this manner, both officer and supervisor can determine whether there is consensus on the appropriateness of the override and broaden their understanding and application of RNR principles. It might also be helpful to let actual experience with a specific case guide an override decision. For example, if, after a few months of supervision, the PO believes a JIC to be at a different level of risk due to a factor that was not part of the initial risk/needs assessment, the PO can then request an override with a better-informed rationale and information at that time. With more observable data available, it is likely that the rationale for an override would be more evidence-based and justified.

Deviations from assessed risk level are most empirically defensible during the most at-risk period for recidivism. Virtually all research on recidivism patterns (i.e., survival curves), regardless of risk level, shows that the first year under supervision is the time when JICs are most at risk for reoffending.

Incorporating this evidence into policy is certainly more defensible than policies for niche groups of JICs. For example, a policy could direct that all JICs with violent (including sexual) offenses will begin their period of supervision under close observation for the first 6 months, due the harm they have caused. This 6-month period would typically allow sufficient time to fully assess the JIC with one or more risk/needs assessment instruments, develop a stronger PO-JIC relationship, and assess the JIC's initial response to supervision. At the 6-month mark, these JICs could automatically be placed on their assessed level of risk/supervision unless the PO can justify an override.

Finally, we recommend that correctional agencies incorporate offense-specific assessments. There are specific risk/need domains for sex offending and domestic violence cases that are not directly assessed by general risk/need instruments (see Wormith et al., 2020 for a review of violence risk assessments).¹⁰ Adding specialty risk assessments to the protocol will require additional training and resources. However, the benefits include sound, empirically defensible decision-making, policy development, evidence-based practice, and less time spent supervising cases that unnecessarily result from overrides into higher risk levels.

10. Risk/needs assessment is not a crystal ball

Leading criminal risk/needs instruments have a moderate to high degree of accuracy in predicting reoffending, which may vary based on offender characteristics and settings (Desmarais et al., 2016). A risk/needs assessment result that classifies a JIC as low risk is not a guarantee that the client will desist from offending, just as a result that classifies a JIC as high risk is not a guarantee that the client will reoffend. In fact, sometimes low-risk JICs recidivate and high-risk JICs do not. Yet, this does not mean that criminal risk/needs instruments are generally inaccurate. In making sense of the discrepancy that can occur between a JIC's risk assessment result and

outcome, it's helpful to keep in mind that (1) the intent of risk assessment is probabilistic rather than deterministic, (2) criminal risk is dynamic rather than stable and is therefore subject to change—sometimes rapidly if JICs find themselves in particular situations that are unpredictable—and therefore needs to be reassessed periodically, and (3) the purpose of risk/needs assessment is to put strategies in place that will *prevent* reoffending—meaning, JICs identified as high risk will not reoffend because the strategy was successful.

The probabilistic versus deterministic interpretation of criminal risk/needs assessment results is in many ways analogous to a screening for heart disease. Both criminal risk assessment and heart disease screenings are based on examining the client's status on a series of risk factors (or domains). The more risk factor/domains, the higher the person's likelihood of reoffending or, in the alternative scenario, developing heart disease. Those found to be at high-risk for reoffending/heart disease are not destined to reoffending or heart disease; they are just more likely to experience these negative outcomes than those with lower risk scores. Similarly, someone with only a few risk factors/domains for reoffending/heart disease may also experience these negative outcomes, but are less likely to do so than their higher-risk counterparts. Lower-risk individuals may sometimes find themselves in unpredictable situations that trigger or prompt heart-attacks/criminal offenses.

The intent of criminal risk assessment is probabilistic in nature, not diagnostic. Criminal risk assessments are not designed for, nor do they attempt to establish, dichotomous groups (e.g., will offend/won't offend) (Andrews et al., 1990). Rather, they typically group JICs into a three-, four-, or five-tiered system (depending upon the instrument), with each succeeding tier reflecting an increased likelihood of reoffending (Kroner et al., 2020). Using a tiered system, rather than a binary system, allows agencies to modulate supervision intensity more efficiently for different JIC groups.

The analogy between criminal risk/needs assessments and screening for heart disease is also relevant to understanding the dynamic nature of criminal risk and its impact on assessment results. Some of the leading risk factors for heart disease are largely static (e.g., gender, age, family history), while others are dynamic (e.g., smoking, sedentary lifestyle, blood pressure). While the static

¹⁰ Instrument such as the STATIC-99-R (Hanson & Anderson, 2021) can be utilized for sex offenders; and the *Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment* (ODARA; Hilton, 2021) and *Spousal Assault Risk Assessment* (SARA; Kropp & Gibas, 2021) for domestic violence cases. Readers looking for more information regarding training on specialty instruments are referred to *The Society for the Advancement of Actuarial Risk/Need Assessment* (SAARNA) <https://saarna.org/about/>

risk factors cannot change and will therefore always impact risk, the dynamic factors can be altered in ways that increase or reduce risk. If, for example, a client becomes more sedentary and doubles their cigarette intake, their risk for heart disease will increase. Conversely, the introduction of exercise and healthy eating will lower risk. In the same way, some of the leading risk factors/domains for reoffending are static (e.g., prior criminal history), whereas most are dynamic (e.g., presence of criminal peers, substance misuse, employment instability, criminogenic attitudes). Therefore, risk of recidivism can increase or decrease in the months after a criminal risk/needs assessment is conducted, based on fluctuation in a JIC's dynamic risk factors.

The dynamic nature of criminal risk means that JICs who are high-risk can become low-risk and vice versa during a period of community supervision. In this regard, POs who successfully address the needs of their high-risk JICs may have a large proportion of high-risk cases that do not recidivate. However, officers who do not address the dynamic needs of their lower or medium-risk JICs may see more reoffending in these lower risk groups than expected. The dynamic nature of criminal risk means it should be reassessed periodically over the course of supervision. As JICs' criminal risk increases or decreases, supervision intensity can be modulated as needed to allocate resources efficiently and produce better outcomes.

We recommend that agencies conduct a local validation of their risk/needs assessment instruments to ensure that instruments are adequately predicting recidivism. Important benchmarks include the following: (1) clients classified at lower tiers of risk reoffend at lower rates than those classified at higher tiers of risk, (2) the overall predictive validity of the instrument minimally achieves a 65 percent degree of discrimination between those who recidivate and those that do not, and (3) observed agreement reliability among assessors is at least 80 percent (Desmarais et al., 2022). Depending on the risk/needs instrument adopted, it may also be important to periodically reexamine the accuracy of risk/needs instruments and recalibrate cutoff scores (i.e., scores defining the different risk levels) as needed. See the recent guidelines published by the Council of State Governments on *Advancing Fairness and Transparency* for more in-depth recommendations on the validation process (Desmarais et al., 2022). Despite the best attempts of

agencies to maximize predictive accuracy, predicting human behavior is complex, and there will always be error in risk/needs assessments and unpredictable circumstances. But rest assured that the proper use of these instruments produces results that are more accurate than unstructured professional judgment.

Conclusion

If you have read this far you undoubtedly have a strong interest in the most effective use of criminal risk/needs assessment in community corrections. You probably are already familiar with the use of one or more risk/needs assessment instruments and have faced your own challenges in integrating assessment into real-world practice. Perhaps you have experienced some of the stumbling blocks we've described. If so, we hope our discussion has been useful. It can be reassuring to know that these issues are common.

We have shared some hints for moving forward, but if you have found better ways of addressing these issues—or sidestepping some of these problems altogether—we would like to hear from you. One thing we have learned is that there are many creative and eager people, working on the frontlines of our field, whose passion and experience can benefit the entire profession. Also, the community corrections field is dynamic. Best practices in assessment and supervision are not set in stone and will surely be influenced in the coming years by further developments in theory and research.

If there is one overarching theme from this article, we think it is this: risk/needs assessment is the cornerstone of effective community corrections, and optimizing the use of risk/needs assessment takes time and persistent attention. Like all science-based methods, it requires careful implementation and periodic recalibration. It is doable. And it is worth doing.

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