

Assessments

Assessment instruments are a key tool in helping justice systems improve decision making and outcomes. Used across the system—in court, correctional, and community supervision contexts—they provide data-driven predictions of the likelihood of certain events. In this way, they allow the system to understand how best to manage its limited resources in order to offer services to people who are justice-involved while assuring victims and the community that their safety and well-being are paramount.

Types of Assessments

The two primary types of assessments used in the justice system are risk assessments and risk/needs assessments. **RISK ASSESSMENTS** assess a person's risk of being rearrested, fleeing, or failing to appear in court. They are based on unchangeable factors such as age, gender, and prior criminal history. In addition to assessing risk, **RISK/NEEDS ASSESSMENTS** identify changeable factors, such as thoughts and beliefs, personality/temperament, and peers, that are associated with the risk of recidivism. Some assessments are specialized, designed to obtain more information about a specific criminogenic need (substance abuse) or a responsiveness issue (e.g., gender, mental health, trauma).

Using Assessment Results

Assessment instruments should be used as early in each stage of the justice system as possible. Pretrial assessments help determine what supports would help a person who has been released appear in court and remain arrest-free during the pretrial period. Jail assessments are used to determine housing classification and appropriate programming. In community corrections, assessments are used to determine a person's supervision level and the focus of interventions. Treatment providers use assessments to establish levels and intensity of care. At the reentry stage, assessments help support a successful transition to the community.



**ACTUARIAL
AND VALIDATED:
DOES IT MATTER?**

YES! Actuarial tools are the industry standard when it comes to predicting risk. Such tools use specific, measurable variables correlated with behavior to estimate outcomes—for example, the likelihood of committing a future illegal act—for similar people in future cases. While actuarial tools are not 100% accurate, study after study have shown that they predict outcomes more reliably than professional judgment alone. Studies have also shown that they are less likely to result in bias when used appropriately.¹

To ensure that assessments accurately assess the likelihood of future events regardless of a person's race, gender, or other individual factors, they also need to be validated, preferably with the local population on which they are being used.²

¹ See *Risk Assessment and Racial Fairness: The Proper Use of Risk-Needs Assessments* (<http://www.ccappoap.com/public/ebpimplementation/#s-123ea509-c68f-432a-a75e-c72284deda11>), written by Ret. Judge Roger K. Warren.

² PCCD is currently working on a statewide validation of the Ohio Risk Assessment System (ORAS).

Risk Level and Intervention Intensity

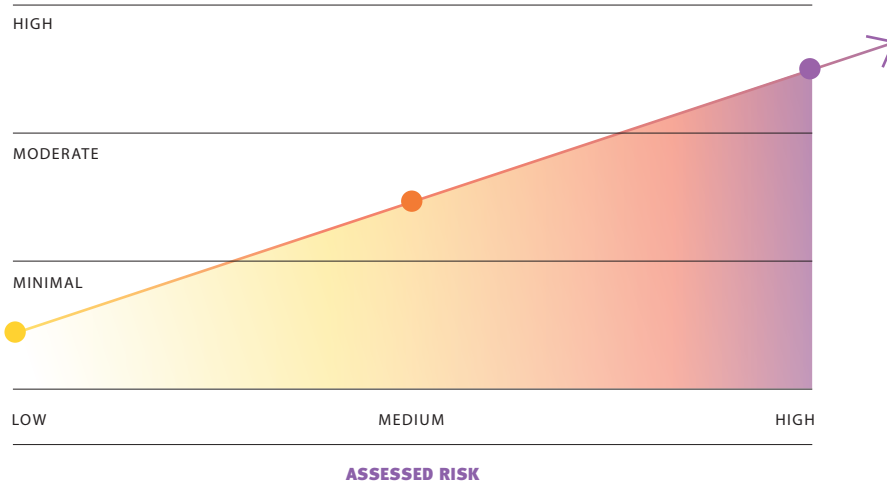
People assessed as low risk are often ideal candidates for diversion programs. They usually self-correct and are unlikely to benefit from correctional interventions designed to change their behavior. In fact, increased intervention may *increase* their risk of recidivism. Instead, people at low risk should receive quick, short interventions focused on their stabilization needs (e.g., mental and physical health, housing).

People assessed as moderate or high risk are most likely to benefit from correctional interventions focused on their criminogenic needs. The higher the risk, the more prolonged and more intensive the programming. Staff who work with people at medium or high risk should ideally have caseloads in the 40–50 range.

People assessed as extremely high risk might be able to benefit from interventions; however, the length of time and intensity of the interventions will likely exceed the agency's resource capacity. This group should be placed under intensive supervision, with a focus on community safety. Staff working with people at extremely high risk should carry smaller caseloads, ideally 15–20 people.

A person's risk score can change over time. Reassessments at regular intervals and when a person's situation changes allow for adjusting supervision and programming targets. Reassessments also help determine whether current interventions are leading to behavior change.

INTERVENTION INTENSITY



CQI

HOW TO ENSURE ASSESSMENTS ARE SCORED AND USED CORRECTLY

Staff must have the knowledge and skills to score and use assessment tools properly. Continuous quality improvement (CQI) is essential and should include initial and ongoing staff training, interrater reliability testing (which measures how consistently different raters score the same person using an assessment instrument), coaching and mentoring, routine data monitoring, and fidelity testing.

USING ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Agencies should use assessment results to determine how much and what type of intervention a person requires. Results should not be used to determine a person's guilt, innocence, or sentence.