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Evaluation News provides information on the BJA Center for Program Evaluation and Performance Measurement, promotes the exchange of information on evaluation and performance measurement, and publicizes criminal justice research and evaluation

SPECIAL ISSUE: RISK ASSESSMENT

In the field of criminal justice, risk assessment refers to the attempt to manage offender behavior and predict future criminal behavior at various stages in the criminal justice process, including sentencing, corrections, and parole. Risk assessment involves the evaluation of offenders on key variables that are believed to be related to criminal or other negative behavior. These risk factors may be static or dynamic. Static factors are those that do not change (e.g., sex/gender), while dynamic factors can change over time (e.g., employment status). Over the past twenty years there has been a good deal of research conducted on risk assessment. This edition of Evaluation News highlights several recent studies of risk assessments. The goal is to show the variety of uses for risk assessment, to provide the results of evaluations of these varied assessments, and to help decisionmakers select appropriate tools.

RISK ASSESSMENT - COMMUNITY-BASED CORRECTIONS

Kim, Joo, and McCarty studied risk assessment and client classification in day reporting centers (DRC) in Douglas County, Nebraska. A DRC is an intermediate sanction consisting of a pretrial release program that is intended to provide a cost-effective alternative to incarceration by reducing jail overcrowding and rehabilitating offenders through intensive programming. This study sought to assess the effects of risk and need factors on both a client's termination from the DRC program and a client's recidivism after release. The study included 273 participants. Recidivism, defined as a new arrest, was tracked for the successful graduates during a one-year follow-up period. The analysis identified four statistically significant variables that influenced clients' termination from the DRC: two static risk variables (type of offense, such as felony versus misdemeanor, and GED class, or education) and two dynamic need variables (length of stay and relapse prevention). In addition, three statistically significant variables were identified that influenced clients' recidivism: two static variables (age on admission and risk points, or criminal history), and one dynamic variable (employment). These seven variables were used to create a risk/needs index to predict termination from the DRC or recidivism after release. Among the four significant variables, two static variables (the type of offense and the level of education) were used in the intake process. These two variables were found to play an important role in the risk/needs assessment and management of the DRC's clients. The study Risk

Useful resources for criminal justice program evaluation and performance measurement are available at the BJA Center for Program Evaluation and Performance Measurement web site: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/evaluation>.

Assessment and Classification of Day Reporting Center Clients: An Actuarial Approach, was published in the June 2008 issue of Criminal Justice and Behavior and it is available at:

<http://cjb.sagepub.com/content/35/6/792>

RISK ASSESSMENT - SEX OFFENDERS

Looman and Abracen examined the performance of four risk assessment instruments (Static-2002, RM2000, RRASOR, and Static-99) in measuring the risk of recidivism among 419 sex offenders assessed prior to release from a sexual offender treatment program. The study also explored the ability of the risk assessment tools to predict recidivism for different types of sex offenders; specifically, child molesters vs. those whose victims were adults. Recidivism was defined as a new conviction for another criminal offense, with offenses broken out into three categories: sexual offending; violent, nonsexual offending; and nonsexual, nonviolent offending. Data were analyzed by offender type as well as for the group as a whole. The follow-up period for this study was 7 years. The analyses revealed that the Static-2002 performed best in predicting sexual and violent crimes although, with the exception of the RRASOR, differences between measures were not significant. The RRASOR performed poorly overall. For rapists, the Static-2002 performed best for sexual recidivism, and the Risk Matrix 2000 performed best for violent recidivism. None of the measures performed well in predicting recidivism for child molesters. Further analyses of the Static-2002 predicting sexual recidivism by sex offender type showed that: persistence of sexual offending and age at release were the only significant predictors for the group as a whole and for rapists; and, for child molesters, only the deviant sexual interests component was a significant predictor. The study, Comparison of Measures of Risk for Recidivism in Sexual Offenders, was published in the July 2009 issue of the Journal of Interpersonal Violence and it is available at: <http://jiv.sagepub.com/content/25/5/791>

RISK ASSESSMENT - SENTENCING

Kleiman, Ostrom, and Cheesman evaluated the effectiveness of Virginia's sentencing risk assessment instrument. This instrument was piloted in Virginia from 1997-2000. It was intended to identify nonviolent offenders for diversion from prison to other alternative sanctions while minimizing the threat to public safety. Specifically, the authors assessed the ability of the risk assessment instrument to differentiate nonviolent offenders with the lowest probability of recidivating from those with higher probabilities of recidivism. Analyses were based on a non-random sample of 555 drug, fraud, and larceny offenders eligible for risk assessment. Recidivism was defined in two ways: any new felony or misdemeanor arrest or any new felony or misdemeanor conviction and the average follow-up period for all offenders was 27 months. They found that Virginia's risk assessment instrument was able to distinguish nonviolent offenders less likely to recidivate from those more likely to recidivate. Specifically, as the total risk score of an offender rose, so did the likelihood of offender recidivism. While these results were encouraging, the authors stated that more research should be conducted to explore how to improve the accuracy and efficiency of the tool. Overall, the authors felt that the risk assessment instrument provides an objective, reliable, transparent, and more accurate alternative to assessing an offender's potential for recidivism than use of judicial intuition or perception. The study, Using Risk Assessment to Inform Sentencing Decisions for Nonviolent Offenders in Virginia, was published in the January 2007 issue of Crime and Delinquency and it is available at: <http://cad.sagepub.com/content/53/1/106>

RISK ASSESSMENT - GENDER

Rettinger and Andrews examined recidivism in 411 female offenders who were either incarcerated or under community supervision in Ontario. With this study they aimed to expand the knowledge of female offending by

exploring how well various factors predict criminal behavior. These factors included traditional gender-neutral variables as well as several gender-specific variables. Recidivism was defined as a conviction for any new offense (general recidivism) or an offense involving crimes against persons (violent recidivism). The follow-up period was 57 months. The analyses revealed that the gender-neutral, Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (LS/CMI), a tool used to predict risk and needs that is not targeted at any one stage of criminal justice processing, performed very well in the prediction of general and violent recidivism of female offenders, but there was some support for the usefulness of gender-specific factors for low-risk, low-need women. The study, General Risk and Need, Gender Specificity, and the Recidivism of Female Offenders, is available in the January 2010 issue of Criminal Justice and Behavior at: <http://cjb.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/37/1/29>

RISK ASSESSMENT IN THE STATES - OHIO

In 2006 the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections (DRC) contracted with the University of Cincinnati, Center for Criminal Justice Research to develop a universal Ohio-based assessment system that would be utilized at various points in the criminal justice system. The project has recently been completed and it produced a tool known as the Ohio Risk Assessment System (ORAS). ORAS is a system-wide set of assessment tools that can be used at pretrial, prior to or while on community supervision, at prison intake, and in preparation for reentry just prior to release from prison. In addition to being able to distinguish between risk levels and predict the likelihood of rearrest and recidivism at different points in the criminal justice system, ORAS also increases reliability of assessments, reduces duplication of effort, and increases the efficient allocation of resources. For more information on this project see: http://www.uc.edu/ccjr/Reports/ProjectReports/ORAS_Final_Report.pdf

TIP: HOW TO PICK THE RIGHT ASSESSMENT

Often criminal justice professionals are unsure of what to assess, when to assess it, what assessment tool to use, and what to do with the information produced by these assessments. The Council of State Governments' Justice Center's Reentry Policy Council created an interactive tool to help with these decisions. The goal of this tool is to encourage administrators and personnel in corrections and community settings to think comprehensively about screening and assessment and to provide advice about what information should be collected about an individual's risks and needs at key intervals throughout the period of incarceration and community supervision. It also describes who should collect information and offers suggestions for sources for this information and appropriate risk assessment instruments. The assessment tool can be found at:

<http://tools.reentrypolicy.org/assessments/chart>