

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Assessment with a Flair: Offender Accountability in Supervision Plans

Source Document: Taxman, F. (2006). Assessment with a Flair: Offender Accountability in Supervision Plans. *Federal Probation*, 70(2), 2-7.

Key Words: assessment, case plans, risk, criminogenic needs, high risk offenders, evidence-based practice

Assessments and Case Plans

Summary/Conclusions

The author has conducted a significant amount of work in the criminal justice system. She teamed with the State of Maryland to create the Proactive Community Supervision model, which used research-driven and evidence-based practices (EBP) to reduce rates of recidivism and technical violations. This article highlights "Rule Number One in EBP," which includes focusing services on the highest risk offenders. Taxman details the use of assessments to determine the criminogenic needs and risk, which are combined to determine the areas to address in case plans. Effective case plans must address both treatment and supervision needs to ensure proper length and intensity.

Limitations of Information

Although the article cautions against over-supervising low risk probationers, some districts have limited supervision options for this population. Also, caseloads are rising and probation officers are tempted to rush through the assessments. Because quality assessments drive the supervision level, the case plan, and referrals, it is the most important step in supervision. To be done well, it requires detailed attention and time.

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.

"Assessment is not just a stand-alone process." The LSI or CYO-LSI is a validated instrument, with a great deal of research behind it. Although there are times when professional judgment seems to be enough, "research persists in demonstrating that standardized objective tools enhance decision-making," and guard against biased or inconsistent decisions.

The goal of assessment is to provide the probation officer (PO) with a reliable identification of risk and criminogenic needs. The risk level indicates the likelihood the offender will engage in future crime. The criminogenic needs, "if unaddressed, tend to increase the risk that the individual will commit criminal acts." Sometimes it is difficult to discern which needs "should be addressed as part of the criminal justice system, and which factor may be important for the person to address in the greater scheme of his or her overall health and well-being, but do not necessarily need to be encompassed in the criminal justice system." An example is substance abuse. Even though a majority of offenders are drug involved, research cited in the article indicates that only about one-third of males "have substance abuse patterns that require treatment." When identifying substance use as a possible criminogenic need, the PO needs to understand "the relationship between substance use and crime depends upon the nature of the use and situation." Treatment should be reserved for the higher risk population. Some personal factors, which intuitively seem like they should be addressed as part of probation supervision (such as "mental health status, self-esteem, low educational

attainment"), have not been found to predict criminal behavior, "and the research literature does not demonstrate that the presence of these attributes predicts recidivism or involvement in criminal behavior." However, these non-criminogenic needs should be considered, when developing individualized case plans, while giving priority to criminogenic need areas.

Practical Applications

- √ Use MI techniques to conduct assessment interviews to engage the probationer and more accurately identify criminogenic needs.
- √ Ensure quality assessments, verified with collateral information, and trust the tools to provide accurate results upon which to act.
- √ Assessments scores should drive the length and intensity of supervision and treatment needs.
- √ Avoid over-supervising low risk probationers. Consider a supervision alternative, such as a kiosk system (being piloted) or volunteer caseload.
- √ Focus resources on the higher risk probationers.
- √ Learn to discern the difference between a criminogenic need and a need that may improve their overall well-being but isn't associated with their propensity to commit crimes, ie: substance use.
- √ Collaborative case plans should be developed for higher risk probationers, with time-framed goals aimed at effecting criminogenic needs and changing probationer behavior.