

- **Goals of this Guide, and How to Use It**
- **Background and Context**
- **Understanding the Evidence and Its Implications for Using Risk and Needs Assessment Tools**
 - Risk/Needs Assessment as a Fundamental of Evidence-Based Practice
 - Determining Risk of Recidivism and Identifying Targets for Change
 - Risk and Need Principles and Effective Interventions
- **Moving Toward Implementing Practice Improvements**
- **Develop a Plan to Measure Performance**
- **Sample Documents**
- **References/Endnotes**
- **Links**
- **Acknowledgments**

Use of Valid Actuarial Assessments of Risk and Needs

Understanding the Evidence and Its Implications for Using Risk and Needs Assessment Tools

Determining Risk of Recidivism and Identifying Targets for Change

Empirically derived tools have the ability to determine the likelihood of recidivism within offender populations. While no tool can forecast future behavior with perfect accuracy, empirical risk and needs assessment tools consistently outperform individual professional judgment. Individual judgment, sometimes called professional or clinical judgment predicts recidivism no better than chance (Harris, 2006). Structured risk assessment tools draw upon analyses of predictors of recidivism in large offender populations to determine attributes that have a consistent relationship to recidivism, just as insurance companies analyze data about drivers to determine what attributes are predictive in involvement in accidents, as the basis for decisions such as setting higher premium rates for teenage drivers.

Research analyses of predictors of recidivism have been quite consistent in the primary factors they identify. Attributes that are highly correlated with risk to re-offend include:

- Age at first arrest (earlier onset of criminal behavior means more likely to recidivate)
- Current age (younger offenders recidivate more)
- Criminal history (more extensive criminal history makes future offending more likely) (Gendreau, Little, and Goggin, 1996)

These are all static factors, or those that cannot be changed.) For the most part, static factors are sufficient for the purpose of making good determinations about the likelihood that an offender will reoffend, and sorting offender populations into risk categories, particularly if there is detailed information available about criminal history (Austin, 2006, Barnoski and Aos, 2003). Assessment tools relying primarily on static factors have been in use throughout the criminal justice system for some time. Many jurisdictions have developed their own static risk assessment tools, as it is possible to construct, validate and apply them using locally-available justice system administrative data (Turner et al. 2009; Barnoski and Drake, 2007).

While determining risk levels through static factors alone can be useful for a variety of justice system decisions, efforts to reduce risk to the community require information on dynamic, or changeable, factors related to risk of recidivism. These factors, also known as criminogenic needs, provide targets for change that can guide establishment of the conditions of community supervision, treatment program assignment, case management, and assessment of offender change progress. The criminogenic needs with the strongest demonstrated relationship to recidivism are (Andrews and Bonta 2010):

- Antisocial attitudes, beliefs and values
- Antisocial behavior patterns
- Antisocial peers and associates
- Antisocial personality and temperamental factors
- Family/marital stressors
- Substance abuse
- Lack of education, employment stability or achievement
- Lack of pro-social activities in leisure time

The first four needs on the list are referred to as the "big four" and have the strongest relationship to future criminal behavior. They are therefore the most important issues to focus on in order to reduce risk. The next four, while important, do not have as strong an influence on the likelihood of reoffending, and should be a secondary priority to addressing the top four.

Antisocial attitudes, beliefs and values	Attitudes, values, beliefs, and rationalizations supportive of crime; cognitive emotional states of anger, resentment, and defiance
Antisocial behavior patterns	Early and continuing involvement in a number and variety of antisocial acts and a variety of settings
Antisocial peers and associates	Close association with criminal others and relative isolation from anticriminal others; immediate social support for crime
Antisocial personality and temperamental factors	Adventurous, pleasure seeking, weak self-control, restlessly aggressive
Family/marital stressors	Two key elements are 1) nurturance and/or caring, and 2) monitoring and/or supervision
Substance abuse	Abuse of alcohol and/or other drugs
Lack of education, employment stability or achievement	Low levels of performance and satisfaction in school and/or work
Lack of pro-social activities in leisure time	Low levels of involvement and satisfaction in anticriminal leisure pursuits

Figure 2. Criminogenic Need Factors, Adapted from Andrews, Bonta and Wormith (2006)

< [Risk/Needs Assessment as a Fundamental of Evidence-Based Practice](#)

[Risk and Need Principles and Effective Interventions](#) >