Assessments Glossary _ Criminal Justice

Assessment

An examination, more comprehensive than a screening, often completed after initial intake procedures and consisting of comprehensive appraisals of a variety of service needs including physical health, education, housing, employment, education, and substance abuse. Assessment usually includes a recommendation for treatment and programming interventions, as well as supervision levels.

Assessment Process

All of the points at which information is gathered and shared about a person as he or she comes into a booking facility or jail, and moves through his or her stay to be transferred to a prison, period of community supervision, and/or release.

Co-occurring Disorders

Two or more disorders occurring simultaneously. Generally, the term refers to mental health and substance abuse disorders, but can refer to mental health, substance abuse, physical health, developmental, or other disorders.

Corrections Counselor

An employee of the jail, prison, or community corrections agency who administers screenings and assessments. He or she may also be responsible for interpreting these assessments to develop a plan for treatment, programming, and service referrals to prepare individuals to transition from prison or jail to the community.

Criminal Thinking

The list of assessment instruments in this tool includes descriptions of instruments that are used to assess criminal thinking and psychopathy, among other attributes and behaviors. The Justice Center takes no position for or against the use of these instruments; they are presented merely as a representation of what is available in the field.

Some researchers and criminal justice practitioners believe that people commit crimes because they demonstrate errors in thinking, or "criminal thinking," which lead them to commit crimes and then justify their actions. According to supporters of the criminal thinking concept, these errors include discounting the suffering of victims, feeling a sense of entitlement, and failing to appreciate long-term effects of individual actions. Other researchers, psychologists, and criminal justice practitioners disagree with this explanation; there is no consensus in the field.

Critics of the criminal thinking paradigm assert that, while these individual attributes and thinking patterns may be found in people who commit crime, they are also found in people who do not commit crime. For this reason, critics believe, thinking patterns cannot be presented as causing people to commit crime. Instead, critics emphasize that environmental factors play a significant role in the reasons that people commit crimes.

Critics also question the utility of assessing for criminal thinking when, they claim, reliable assessment of criminal thinking is difficult; there are few experimental studies demonstrating that criminal thinking can be altered by correctional agencies; and criminal justice agencies are not organized to provide treatment along these lines.

Criminogenic Factors

Elements of an individual's character and environment that might contribute to his or her committing crimes, and which may therefore provide a valuable resource for predicting and responding to recidivism.

Cultural Competency

Consensus panels convened by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) have defined cultural competency as "an acceptance and respect for difference, a continuing self-assessment regarding culture, a regard for and attention to the dynamics of difference, (and an) engagement in on-going development of cultural knowledge, and resources and flexibility within service models to work toward better meeting the needs of minority populations."

Dynamic Risk Factors

Changing conditions of an individual's character and environment that might contribute to criminal behavior, including antisocial attitudes, substance abuse, educational deficiencies, mental health problems, and social skills. Because they may be improved with treatment, dynamic risk factors correspond to service and treatment needs that must be met in order for an individual to avoid recidivism.

Instrument

Specific paper- or computer-based form used to collect information about an individual throughout the assessment process.

Information Sources

Types of records within criminal justice agencies and community-based organizations (*e.g.,* treatment records) to draw upon during the assessment process.

Motivational Interviewing

A directive, client-centered counseling style for eliciting behavior change by helping individuals to explore and resolve ambivalence. Compared with nondirective counseling, it is more focused and goal-directed. The examination and resolution of ambivalence is its central purpose, and the counselor is intentionally directive in pursuing this goal.

Norming

Instruments that have been "normed" to the local population have been calibrated to ensure that results for the new population, such as the population of prisoners in a particular facility, are as valid as they are for the population for which the instruments were developed.

Personnel

Types of prison, jail, and community corrections staff and community-based service providers who should be charged with collecting the kinds of information described in this tool.

Program Examples

Illustrations from the field of how an issue is assessed in a particular corrections or community setting.

Psychopathy

Psychopathy is thought to be characterized in individuals by superficial charm, deceit, antisocial behaviors, and a lack of guilt. Developers of this concept believe that these qualities lead individuals to commit crimes and then justify their actions. Critiques of this concept are similar to that of criminal thinking (see above). There is no consensus in the field about its utility.

Recidivism

The return of an individual released from prison or jail to the custody of a correctional facility. Different jurisdictions tend to have unique definitions for the types of crimes that result in recidivism, ranging from reincarceration only after arrest for a new crime, to reincarceration for technical violation of the conditions of release.

Reliability

Reliable instruments will produce the same or similar results for a group of individuals, even when administered by different assessors. Reliability can be measured by having the scores of a sample of individuals re-computed by another person. If both testers produce the same scores in at least 80 percent of cases, and produce the same overall results in at least 90 percent of cases, then the administration of the instrument is reliable. Testing for reliability is important to ensure consistency of administration among staff, regardless of whether a particular instrument has been validated.

Screening

Instruments that are administered immediately upon intake and used to identify acute needs, such as suicide risk or medication needs, and to identify potential needs for further assessment.

Static Risk Factors

Unchanging conditions of an individual's character, environment, or criminal history that might contribute to criminal behavior, including the number and severity of prior convictions, prior behavior during confinement, and a history of childhood abuse and neglect.

Validity

Assessment instruments that have been "validated" are those that have been statistically determined to accurately predict outcomes for the population served in the issue areas being assessed. Validity applies to both face value (whether the instrument or process used makes sense to those who use it) and predictive validity (whether the instrument or process can predict and measure risks such as recidivism with statistical accuracy). Validation processes have found that previously validated tools may not be valid for all populations: what works for probationers may not work for prisoners.

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