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Development and Delivery of a Scale for the Evaluation of Risk-Needs (SERN) in Romanian Probation Services

The Romanian Probation Service has developed a risk-needs instrument (SERN) to manage supervision risk.

Why we did this study

The application of offender risk/needs assessment technology to improve correctional performance on reducing re-offending is a major project underway in the Romanian Probation Service (RPS). This project falls under the auspices of a technical exchange between RPS and the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC). The present report examines the results of an enhanced case management approach to offender risk/needs assessment that was undertaken by probation staff in Romania.

What we did

The 'Static Factors' and 'Dynamic Factors' components of CSC's risk assessment and management processes were adapted and field tested in a variety of RPS settings. The present investigation began with the design and development of an instrument for offender risk/needs evaluation in Romania. The Scale for the Evaluation of Risk/Needs (SERN) protocol for probationers was comprised of three sections: 1) Static Risk Factors (12 criminal history items and risk level rating); 2) Dynamic Risk Factors or criminogenic needs (9 domains with 2 items each totalling 18 items and needs level rating); and 3) Special Needs and Summary (priority needs, overall risk-needs and motivation). A snapshot sample of 751 offenders (673 men; 78 women) who were assessed while under the supervision of RPS over the course of a one-month period (September 2014) was assembled for study.

What we found

The results of the 'risk/needs' field study replicated international findings regarding the operational value of systematically assessing and re-assessing offender risk and need. Both men and women probationers were easily differentiated by RPS staff as to the level of risk and needs as well as the nature of needs presented by offenders. Overall, the risk level distributions of low-, moderate- and high-risk level cases were 66.6%, 27.8% and 5.6%, respectively. On the other hand, the needs level distributions of low-, moderate- and high-need cases were 48.5%, 41.0% and 10.5%, respectively. Interestingly, from a resource allocation perspective combining risk and need level ratings resulted in the majority of probation cases being assessed in the low risk/low needs and low risk/moderate needs categories, 43.3% and 21.2%, respectively.

The next major risk-needs category was those assessed as moderate-risk/moderate needs with a small percentage in the high-risk/high-needs category (3.7%). Not surprisingly, women probationers were more likely than men to be assessed as low risk/low needs (51.3% versus 42.4%) and low risk/moderate needs (26.9% and 20.5%) whereas men probationers were more likely to be assessed as high risk/high needs (4.0% versus 1.3%).

What it means

Upon having successfully introduced risk/needs-based assessment technology in RPS, a next step would be to expand the nature and scope of the SERN initiative into a broader implementation exercise. Using the full application (Administrative Information, Evaluation of Risk/Needs, and Sentence Plan) would have added benefits whereby standardised reports are generated, sentence plans are produced and valuable management information is delivered for strategic planning purposes. Implementation would necessarily shift the focus from raising awareness about variation in offender and needs in RPS to an enhanced case management function that yields estimates for resource allocation.

For more information

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