

The author(s) shown below used Federal funds provided by the U.S. Department of Justice and prepared the following final report:

Document Title: Alameda County Placement Risk Assessment Validation, Executive Summary

Author(s): National Council on Crime and Delinquency

Document No.: 189241

Date Received: 08/14/2001

Award Number: 1998-JB-VX-0109

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189241

ALAMEDA COUNTY PLACEMENT RISK ASSESSMENT VALIDATION

PROPERTY OF

National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS)
Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20849-6000

Executive Summary

Grant Award: #1998-JB-VX-0109

Project Period: 10/1/98 - 8/31/00

June 1, 2001

FINAL REPORT

Approved By: *[Signature]*

Date: 7/16/01

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ALAMEDA COUNTY PLACEMENT RISK ASSESSMENT VALIDATION

Executive Summary

The Alameda County Probation Department was awarded a grant from the National Institute of Justice in 1998 to develop a risk assessment for probation placement cases. The project was a follow-up to a process that began in 1996 when the Department contracted with the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) to construct a five-year plan to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their Juvenile Services Division. NCCD was instrumental in developing the planning approach for graduated sanctions for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's *Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders*. In August of 1996, the Department adopted this strategy as its official governing policy for all system design and policy decisions. Part of this plan was to develop a risk assessment instrument for placement of adjudicated juveniles.

The goal of the project was to implement a system-wide classification and placement system that would address the public concern for safety and effectiveness in dealing with juvenile crime. It would use a structured process that would assess the risk of future recidivism in combination with the severity of the current offense. This risk assessment project would develop a scientific and rational basis for making classification and placement decisions. It would ensure that extra-legal factors were not used in classification and decision making. Further, it would structure the process such that juveniles would be held accountable for delinquent behavior.

The plan for the Department's decision making was shaped by four criteria: validity, reliability, equity, and utility:

- Validity: Does the system measure what it purports to measure? Does it accomplish its goals?
- Reliability: Do similar cases receive similar recommendations for placement services?
- Equity: Is the system fair to various groups?
- Utility: Is the system useful to practitioners? Is it simple to implement?

To begin the development process, NCCD worked with a committee of Probation Unit Supervisors and assisted in the adaptation of a risk assessment instrument from an existing instrument that had been used and validated on probationers in California. This instrument would only address the relative risk of recidivism of the youth and would not take into account the

severity of the current offense. That factor would be included in a structured decision-making system that would be developed after the completion of the risk assessment instrument.

For the validation study, Alameda County adopted the sample risk level cut-off scores. Previous studies had found that these scores were accurate in distinguishing between groups of offenders that had significantly different rates of re-offending. Youths classified as medium-risk were twice as likely to re-offend than youths classified as low-risk. Similarly, high-risk youth were twice as likely to re-offend than medium-risk youth.

Nine probation officers (deputies and supervisors) were trained in the use of the draft instrument. Because of their current involvement in the system, all coders were familiar with the case files. The first phase of data collection involved a random sample of 500 cases that received field supervision as a disposition in 1996. Field supervision refers to a sanction in which the youth was maintained and supervised in the community with the aid of weekend programming, community service, restitution, electronic monitoring, or day reporting. The second data collection phase involved a random sample of 500 cases that received a placement order in 1996. Placement refers to any sanction in which the youth is placed out of home (e.g., a group home, camp, or residential treatment). From these populations it was possible to extrapolate to the total population of youths on field supervision (n=1,334) and the total population of youth in placement (n=774). Further, it was possible to determine the profile of the total population of youth under probation supervision (n=2,108). A number of data elements were collected on each child, and outcomes for each child were tracked for a year after disposition.

After the data were cleaned, the total sample yielded 954 probation cases that were evaluated by the risk assessment instrument and followed through one year for intake actions, petitions filed, and petitions sustained. Three cases with zero scores were initially excluded as they were thought to be data collection errors. However, these cases were later confirmed and added back to the database for the total of 954. With these data, NCCD refined the risk assessment instrument, collapsing certain categories in which there was little difference in recidivism.

When the instrument was first examined, it did not adequately distinguish the risk of recidivism for youth classified as low-, medium-, and high-risk. About half of the high-risk youth had a new sustained petition after one year, but almost a quarter of the low-risk youth did as well. Three steps were taken to improve the instrument:

- Risk assessment questions were simplified, making the instrument easier to use and increasing the difference in recidivism for the groups;

- A clearer delineation of risk for girls and boys was achieved through adjustment of values to one question; and
- The overall scale was adjusted to increase the instrument's predictive capacity.

The sample of 954 cases was predominantly male, with only 28.3 percent (n=270) being female. Most of the sample consisted of African-American youth, which reflects the juvenile justice population in Alameda County. Youth between the ages of 14 and 15 were the largest age group in the sample (45.2 percent, n=431) with youth 16 or older (36.5 percent, n=348) and 13 or younger (18.3 percent, n=175) following.

There was about an even split in the disposition outcomes for the sample, with youth going to field supervision (50 percent, n=480) slightly higher than the number going to placement (49.6 percent, n=474). This split is relatively reflective of the general probation population in Alameda County. A 1995 study showed that 56.7 percent of youth went to field supervision, while 43.3 percent went to placement (including camp, n=1,610).

There were some interesting differences between males and females on the final risk assessment score. Females tended to be older, had parents with better skill levels, and had fewer school problems. Males had more extensive criminal backgrounds and more institutional commitments. More females tended to have negative peers, but there were more gang members among the males.

Whites were older and had lower rates of criminal history than other groups, but higher rates of drug and alcohol use. African-Americans were younger than the overall average, had more institutional commitments, and lower rates of drug and alcohol use. The rate of African-American youth with parents lacking skills was higher than for other groups. They also had the highest rate of severe truancy. Hispanics had higher rates of constructive parenting, but the lowest rate of school attendance. They also had considerably higher rates of gang membership than other groups.

Results of an analysis of the risk assessment questions also show that the problems of these youth were interrelated. For youth with little or no parental support, only 4 percent were attending school. The majority of these youth (85 percent) had severe truancy problems or had been expelled. More than half of these youth were involved with drugs, compared with only 30 percent of those with constructive parenting. Drug use was also related to school performance. Only about 30 percent of those with good school records reported drug use, but almost 60 percent of those with serious problems in school had used drugs or had a problem with drugs. (Alcohol use was low among the entire population.) The majority of youth in the sample had delinquent peers, regardless of the skill level of their parents.

Total risk scores ranged from 0 to fifteen, with the majority of the cases falling between seven and nine. When these scores were grouped in risk categories, most of the cases in the sample fell into the "medium" risk category. A quarter fell into the high-risk category, and only about 11 percent fell into the low-risk category.

Again, the goal of a validation study of a risk assessment instruments is to determine if the instrument is predictive of aggregate rates of recidivism. Youth in the sample who scored in the higher risk categories should have higher rates of recidivism than youth in the lower risk categories. It should be noted that while youth who score in the higher categories in the risk assessment might have higher rates of recidivism, the rates might not be as high as expected. Even though no risk assessment was in use at the time that placement decisions were made, it is reasonable that the good judgment of probation officers would cause higher risk youth to be sent to secure settings or assigned to intensive levels of supervision. As a result, those youth would have less opportunity to recidivate than the lower risk youth, who would be more likely to be placed on less intensive probation supervision.

The risk assessment was evaluated for three measures of recidivism: intake actions, petitions filed, and petitions sustained through one year after the placement decision was made. Only about 60 percent of the total sample had another arrest after one year. These data clearly showed the difference in rates of recidivism among the low, medium, and high-risk levels. While only a quarter of the low-risk youth had an arrest after one year, more than three-quarters of high-risk youth did. The rate of recidivism for the medium-risk category was about the average for the total sample.

The next measure of recidivism that was examined was the rate of youth with a petition filed after one year. Again, the data showed that youth in the lower levels of risk were much less likely than youth in the higher levels of risk to have a petition filed after one year. Three quarters of the high-risk youth had a new filed petition, while only about 20 percent of the low-risk youth did. The rate of recidivism of the medium-risk category was again about the same as the total sample.

The next measure – petitions sustained -- was probably the best measure of recidivism of the four measures, because the youth actually had a finding in court that the incident of recidivism occurred. The number of youth with at least one sustained petition was tracked through one year after original disposition. High-risk youth were more than five times as likely as low-risk youth to have a sustained petition one year after disposition. The rate of recidivism for the medium-risk offenders was just slightly lower than the overall average.

The risk assessment instrument was effective in predicting which youth were more likely to be arrested, have a petition filed, and have a petition sustained. Thus, the instrument was valid in predicting risk of recidivating. An analysis of each of the risk assessment questions found that each one was valid in predicting risk of recidivism.

The study also looked at whether similar cases received similar treatment through the risk assessment. Males and females fell into the medium category at equal rates. Males were more likely to score in the high-risk level than females. An analysis of each of the risk assessment questions showed that males scored higher than females on the factors of age (females were older), criminal history (males had more extensive criminal backgrounds), institutional commitments (males had more commitments), and peer relations (more males were in a gang). On the other hand, females scored higher on the measure of lack of parental skills.

The study also looked at the fairness of the outcomes by risk level. In other words, do different groups of youth in the same risk levels re-offend at the same rates? This analysis would demonstrate if the risk assessment was more effective or less effective for various groups. Rates of petitions sustained after a year were higher for males than females, but high-risk youth were far more likely than low-risk youth to have a sustained petition: females eight times as likely and males almost five times as likely.

More African-American and Hispanic youth fell into the high-risk category than did White youth. A third of Hispanic youth and 27 percent of Black youth were classified as high-risk, as compared with 19 percent of White youth. Although there were few Asians in the study, a greater percentage fell into the low-risk group than other races. An analysis of each of the risk assessment questions revealed the factors that contributed to the variance among races. African-Americans were generally younger, had more extensive prior criminal records, more institutional commitments, parents who were lacking skills, and records of suspensions and expulsions from school. On the other hand, African-Americans were rated as having fewer problems with drugs and alcohol than the other races. Hispanics scored higher on the criminal history and school problem measures. The numbers in this analysis were very low, but the data show that for all racial groups high-risk youth were far more likely than low-risk youth to have a sustained petition. The recidivism rates for African Americans and Whites were higher than those for Hispanics.

The sample was also tracked by disposition. Probation officers were making placements that were similar to those that would be indicated by the risk assessment. Only a small percent of cases fell into the low-risk category and were sent to placement; likewise, a small percent of cases in the high-risk category were placed on field supervision. Data showed that the rate of

recidivism for youth on field supervision increased dramatically among the low, medium and high levels of supervision. High-risk youth were six times more likely to have a sustained petition within one year than low-risk youth, and more than twice as likely as medium-risk youth. The pattern was the same for placement cases.

NCCD presented these findings on April 18, 2000 to a meeting of juvenile court judges, probation supervisors, and other County staff. The consensus of the meeting was that this instrument would be of help in making placement decisions. Probation officers will be completing the risk assessment form and submitting the score to the judge as part of their recommendations for placement. At a later date, the risk assessment score may be included in a placement matrix with severity of offense to indicate appropriate placements.

This risk assessment study of Alameda County probationers not only yielded a validated instrument that could assist staff in making placement decisions, it directed the County toward areas of need. As was addressed in the first section of this document, the County was involved in implementing a continually-changing juvenile justice action plan. The results of the data collection effort for this grant were so revealing that new projects were proposed.

First, the County came to realize how many youth on probation had severe truancy problems, and how strongly truancy was linked to other problems in youths' lives. They used the study to propose to use Juvenile Accountability Incentive Block Grant funds for a truancy prevention project. The lead to that proposal states:

Truancy is notably one of the highest predictors of chronic juvenile crime. According to a 1996 sample study [the risk assessment data collection effort] 35 percent of those on probation in Alameda County are exhibiting severe truancy or behavior problems. Factors that appear to be correlated with poor attendance in school are poor parenting skills, poor peer support and influence, and drug and alcohol use. For example, among those exhibiting severe truancy or behavior problems in school, or have graduated or received a GED certificate, for whom 54 percent have parents with "generally constructive" parenting skills. Only 3 percent of probationers exhibiting chronic truancy behavior have "good" and "supportive" peer relationships. By contrast, 17 percent of those who are regularly attending school, or have graduated or received a GED certificate have "good" and "supportive" peer relations.

The proposal, which was funded, is a model truancy prevention strategy in two schools to improve attendance among youth on probation. The program includes child accountability, quick response to truancy, intensive family work, and a multi-disciplinary approach to case management.

The project also led the County to examine the risk assessment that is used for intake to detention. The focus of the study was to determine the needs and risks of these youths such that

they can receive better probation services and be prevented from offending. The results of this study were presented to the County on August 25, 2000.

Finally, the placement risk assessment project caused probation leaders to think about how resources are being spent in the department. Are probation efforts focused on those youth with the highest likelihood of re-offending, or are funds spread evenly across wards? This 10-month study will look at workload standards, the number of staff necessary for adequate supervision, and the time that needs to be allocated to each youth. This study will help the Department develop standards for probation work and deploy resources more effectively. The workload project will adopt the placement risk assessment categories of risk in setting these time standards. For example, how many probation hours should a low-risk offender require as opposed to a high-risk offender?

This study showed that the placement risk assessment developed by Alameda County was valid, reliable, and fair for that juvenile justice population. Therefore, the instrument can be useful for staff who are making informed placement decisions. No risk instrument should take the place of the good judgement of probation officers and judges. However, this risk assessment offers a way to consider eight relevant factors in making that decision. These factors have been supported by juvenile justice research as being indicators of the risk of recidivism.

June 1, 2001

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